

ASSAULTING THE ORDER OF SIGNS:

LANGUAGE DISSECTION IN AVANT-
GARDE POETRY:

TEXTUAL POLITICS FROM CUBIST AND FUTURIST TO
CONCRETE AND DIGITAL POETICS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the continuities and discontinuities between historical and neo-avant-garde poetry and recent developments in digital poetry by means of exploring the significance, implications of and motivations for language dissection in the respective poetic frameworks. The act of taking language apart on different levels of its organisation became the hallmark of avant-garde poetry in the 1910s and 1920s as well as in the 1950s and 1960s, and is established as central feature of the textual politics of the avant-garde in this thesis. Guillaume Apollinaire, F. T. Marinetti, Velimir Chlebnikov, Hugo Ball, Raoul Hausmann and Kurt Schwitters all dismembered the order of signs, dismantling linguistic organisation on the levels of semantic compatibility, syntax and lexicology down to the singular letter. The communicative function of language was programmatically neglected for the sake of the exploration of its material dimension.

After World War II, concrete poets such as Eugen Gomringer, the *Noigandres* group, Franz Mon, the *Wiener Gruppe* and Max Bense built upon the quest of their forerunners and recuperated techniques, strategies and dominant concerns of the historical avant-garde. The parallels between the two phases are not only formally striking: the initial emergence and post-war renaissance of language dissection was triggered by similar driving forces such as developments in the sphere of the fine arts and technological changes. However, the concrete poets were far from just repeating lines of questioning initiated by their forerunners. Instead, they developed further and radicalised the quest of their predecessors, drawing upon developments in critical and linguistic theory as well as their specific cultural and historical background situations and a radically altered media landscape.

Julia Kristeva's notion of the revolutionary implications of the shattering of the symbolic order of language, Adorno's conception of the critical stance inherent in the form of non-organic art works, and Roland Barthe's idea that the material dimension of language is a pure and ideological untainted realm, are theoretical models which seem to capture many of the underlying motivations for language dissection in avant-garde poetry. In the poetic frameworks of the avant-garde poets, language dissection is often posited as a cultural strategy driven by utopian or critical agendas rather than solely as an aesthetic device.

As this thesis shows, different attributes of language are targeted in different poetical frameworks: some poets are mainly concerned with the representational function of language, while others apply their criticism to its epistemological and cognition-structuring dimension. For some avant-gardists, the dissection of the given order of signs presents an attempt to transgress the limits of what is speakable and thinkable. Yet others call attention to the arbitrary, social and convention-based side of language. All these poets, however, by emphasising the material dimension of language, aim at raising awareness and stimulating reflection upon the properties of the sign system used as well as encouraging the recipient to rethink the nature of conventions and social agreement in general. In the most radical poetic frameworks, language dissection is a symbolic gesture of protest, the manifestation of a fundamental cultural critique which questions and withdraws the most basic form of social consensus, the adherence to a given set of linguistic conventions.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own composition and that it contains no material previously published or submitted for the award of any other degree.

Anna Katharina Schaffner

Car la lettre, si elle est seule, est innocente: la faute, les fautes commencent lorsqu'on
aligne les lettres pour en faire des mots (quel meilleur moyen de mettre fin au
discours de l'autre que de défaire le mot et de le faire revenir à la lettre primordiale
comme il est bien dit dans la locution populaire: *n, i, ni, c'est fini*).

Roland Barthes, "Erté ou A la lettre"

[Le texte est] [u]ne pratique que l'on pourrait comparer à celle de la révolution politique:
l'une opère pour le sujet ce que l'autre introduit dans la société.

Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du Langage Poétique*

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INTRODUCTION

1. Reassessing the Relationship between Historical and Neo-Avant-Garde

The notion that the painters of the neo-avant-garde have recuperated, taken up, continued and developed further techniques that had been initiated in the first decades of the past century is widely accepted, and has been the object of numerous studies in the field of the fine arts.¹ Hal Foster for example writes:

In postwar art to pose the question of repetition is to pose the question of the neo-avant-garde, a loose grouping of North American and Western European artists of the 1950s and 1960s who reprised such avant-garde devices of the 1910s and 1920s as collage and assemblage, the ready-made and the grid, monochrome painting and constructed sculpture.²

Foster and Benjamin Buchloh most prominently have also challenged the dismissive attitude against neo-avant-garde art in works such as *The Return of the Real* and *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry* in recent years.³ However, such a critical reassessment is still missing in the sphere of literature, where the precise nature of the liaison between predecessors and descendants has not yet been sufficiently explored and is still marked by sweeping statements or generalised dismissals.

While the fact that concrete poets such as Eugen Gomringer, Franz Mon, Max Bense, and the poets of the *Wiener Gruppe* and the *Noigandres* group, re-appropriated and built upon strategies, techniques and quests of the historical avant-garde has been acknowledged both by the protagonists themselves as well as in critical discourse, the exact nature of this relationship has yet to be theoretically assessed. How do the two phases of avant-garde language experimentation relate to each other in terms of repetition, recuperation and development?

Up to now mainly general judgements circulate, ranging from dismissals of the works of the post-war literary avant-garde as epigonic repetitions to their glorification as radicalisation and improvement of the explorations of its

¹ The term “neo-avant-garde” is deployed in this thesis to refer to any avant-garde works produced after 1945.

² Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The MIT Press, 1996, p. 1.

³ Cf. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*; and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry. Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The MIT Press, 2000.

forerunners.⁴ Are the works of the concrete poets an inauthentic reprise, a re-staging and uncritical repetition of techniques and strategies of the historical avant-garde, as Peter Bürger alleges?⁵ Or can they claim to have continued, developed or even radicalised and improved that which has been begun in the first decades of the past century?

Historical avant-garde and concrete poetry are united by the label avant-garde and by shared poetic techniques, strategies and aesthetic quests, above all a dedication to language dissection and the exploration of the material qualities of language. But apart from these common features, what exactly is the nature of the relationship between historical avant-garde and concrete poetry? Are the works of the neo-avant-garde a pointless revival of an institutionalised and failed historic project that has lost its legitimacy long ago, as Bürger and many others argue? Or is there a sense of progress and development and perhaps even of theoretical radicalisation? As Foster asks: “Are the postwar moments passive repetitions of the prewar moments, or does the neo-avant-garde *act* on the historical avant-garde in ways that we can only now appreciate?”⁶

Bürger, the most prominent critic of the neo-avant-garde, broadly dismisses it as inauthentic reprise, “eine sinnleere Veranstaltung, die jede mögliche Sinnsetzung zulässt”, which has a priori lost the capacity to provoke and protest against the status

⁴ Gerhard Plumpe for instance, allying with Peter Bürger, Hans Manus Enzensberger and Arnold Gehlen, sweepingly dismisses all neo-avant-garde works as epigonic reprisals, which have lost all legitimacy since freedom of action in the arts has already been granted. He writes: “So wird die Einsicht unausweichlich, dass Avantgarde in der Gegenwart – ob als Post-, Neo-, Trans-, Ultra- oder wie immer Avantgarde – nur noch reflexiv und ironisch sein kann als Inszenierung vergangener Gesten im Rahmen moderner Kunst und ihrer spezifischen Kommunikationskonventionen.” Gerhard Plumpe, “Avantgarde. Notizen zum historischen Ort ihrer Programme”. In: *Aufbruch ins 20. Jahrhundert. Über Avantgarden. TEXT UND KRITIK. Zeitschrift für Literatur. Sonderband*, 2001, pp. 13-14.

Enno Stahl also claims that recuperations of avant-garde strategies can only result in replications which lack the explosive socio-cultural force of the originals. Cf. Enno Stahl, *Anti-Kunst und Abstraktion in der literarischen Moderne (1909-1933). Vom italienischen Futurismus bis zum französischen Surrealismus*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997, p. 22.

Michael Backes in contrast takes an oppositional stance and argues that the *Wiener Gruppe* surpasses the historical avant-garde in radicalism and consequence: “Indem die Wiener Nachkriegsavantgarde die Verfahren der historischen Avantgarden seit dem Ästhetizismus und Dadaismus rekapitulierte, verarbeitete, summierte und ‘totalisierte’, erhält deren Entwicklung den Charakter einer abschließenden Summe und eines letzte Konsequenzen ausformulierenden Resümees.” Michael Backes, *Experimentelle Semiotik in Literaturavantgarden. Über die Wiener Gruppe mit Bezug auf die Konkrete Poesie*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2001, pp. 12-13.

⁵ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974, pp. 71-72.

⁶ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 4.

quo. Bürger argues that the historical avant-garde movements were above all reacting against the ineffectiveness of art, and, by implication, against aestheticism, where the complete autonomy of art, its independence from the praxis of life, reached its peak. Bürger, following Marcuse, defines social ineffectiveness, the lack of consequences beyond the sphere of arts, as the inevitable drawback of autonomous art. The historical avant-garde movements intended to change the function of art and to reinstate its socially relevance, by means of attacking the institution of art, Bürger claims, which he defines as the art-distributing and art-producing apparatus as well as prevailing notions about art at a given historical moment.⁷

Bürger gives two main reasons for his dismissal of the neo-avant-garde:⁸ firstly, he identifies the aesthetics of shock as one of the historical avant-garde's main artistic devices, and claims that the means of the historical avant-garde, which are taken up again by the neo-avant-garde, have lost their potential to shock because they are neither original nor surprising anymore. Secondly, Bürger argues that the neo-avant-garde has institutionalised the historical avant-garde as art, and thus cancels its alleged intention of sublating art into life by means of attacking the very institution of art: "Die Neoavantgarde institutionalisiert die Avantgarde als Kunst und negiert damit die genuinen avantgardistischen Intentionen."⁹ He writes:

Nachdem einmal der signierte Flaschentrockner als museumswürdiger Gegenstand akzeptiert ist, fällt die Provokation ins Leere; sie verkehrt sich ins Gegenteil. [...] Den Grund dafür wird man im Scheitern der avantgardistischen Intention einer Aufhebung der Kunst zu suchen haben. Da inzwischen der Protest der historischen Avantgarde gegen die Institution Kunst als Kunst rezipierbar geworden ist, verfällt die Protestgeste der Neoavantgarde der Inauthentizität. Ihr Anspruch, Protest zu sein, ist nicht mehr aufrechtzuerhalten, nachdem er sich als nicht einlösbar erwiesen hat.¹⁰

Because the historical avant-garde has failed to sublimate art into life and to restore its practical social significance, Bürger argues, and because it can now be received as art, the gestures of the neo-avant-garde are insincere, for they are both operating from the inside of the institution they are meant to attack and embark on a mission

⁷ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, p. 29.

⁸ Ibid., p. 85.

⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 71.

which has turned out to be unrealisable and is thus already condemned to failure. Even neo-avant-gardistic attempts to sublimate art into life are always already artistic events, and cannot escape their status as works of art, Bürger alleges.¹¹

However, Bürger's formula of the alleged unified intention of the historical avant-garde, "die Überführung der Kunst in die Lebenspraxis" and the attack upon the false autonomy as well as the institution of art, is problematic already. The very premise that one theory should embrace all activities of the avant-garde, as Dietrich Scheunemann has pointed out, is thorny:

The formula ["That art becomes practical once again" – "the sublation of art into life"] is all too coarse, the categories of "art" and "life" are in urgent need of differentiation, and the basic assumption of a unified intention of the avant-garde, i.e. the intention of reintegrating art into the life process, is far too simplistic to serve as a guide to the exciting diversity and complex nature of the manifestations of the avant-garde.¹²

The assertion of the alleged "failure" of the historical avant-garde is as unacceptable as the general dismissal of the neo-avant-garde as inauthentic, since it implies that one has to assign retrospectively one clear and unified overall intention to the avant-garde to diagnose the failure of its realisation. Moreover, literary movements, as opposed to political ones, cannot "fail" per definition, as Bernd Hüppauf has rightly pointed out:

Was könnte es bedeuten, von einem Scheitern von literarisch-kulturellen Programmen in der Lebenspraxis zu sprechen? Welche Programme wären je erfolgreich gewesen und politisch verwirklicht worden? Es gehört zur Natur der literarisch-kulturellen Programme, Ideale zu postulieren, ohne sich um deren gesellschaftlich konkrete Verwirklichung zu besorgen.¹³

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

¹² Dietrich Scheunemann, "Preface". In: Dietrich Scheunemann (ed.), *European Avant-Garde. New Perspectives*. Amsterdam; Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000 p. 9.

Other shortcomings and problematic aspects of Bürger's theory, such as the inaccuracy of his description, his overly selective choice of works and movements and the proclamation of the "failure" of the avant-garde have been pointed out in detail by Scheunemann, Foster, Martin Lüdcke and others. Cf. Dietrich Scheunemann, "On Photography and Painting. Prolegomena to a new theory of the avant-garde". In: Dietrich Scheunemann (ed.), *European Avant-Garde. New Perspectives*, p. 16.; Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 8ff; Martin W. Lüdcke (ed.), "Theorie der Avantgarde." *Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976.

¹³ Bernd Hüppauf, "Das Unzeitgemäße der Avantgarden: Die Zeit, Avantgarden und die Gegenwart" In: Wolfgang Asholt, Walter Fähnders (eds.), *Der Blick vom Wolkenkratzer. Avantgarde – Avantgardekritik – Avantgardeforschung*. Amsterdam; Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000, p. 558.

Critics who read avant-garde manifestos as concrete and realisable political programmes, Hüppauf claims, improperly blend together imaginary and political spaces. He argues: “Scheitern setzt die Alternative des Gelingens voraus, und die gab es in einem praktisch-politischen Sinn für die Programme der Avantgarden nicht.”¹⁴ And lastly, accepting the premise of the unified intention for a moment, does the fact that something has not succeeded in the first attempt mean that it should never be tried again? As Hubert van den Berg has argued, there is also a moral dimension to protest, even if a change of the contested circumstances does not seem immediately realisable:

The fundamental question rises here, whether the relevance of resistance should only be measured by its chance of success. Does not resistance, does not revolt possess always a moral dimension as well?¹⁵

Many other scholars, critics and writers embrace a similarly dismissive viewpoint as Bürger: the historical avant-garde is frequently considered as the absolute and unrepeatable endgame, a ground zero, the last possible stage of a “tradition which seeks continuity through rejection”, as Octavio Paz put it.¹⁶ “The avant-garde is the great breach, and with it the ‘tradition against itself’ comes to an end”, Paz declares.¹⁷ Another frequent accusation against the neo-avant-garde is that it lacks the socio-cultural explosive force of the historical one, that it is uncritical, affirmative and that it willingly surrenders to commodification and appropriation by the culture industry.¹⁸ It is repeatedly defamed as epigonic imitation, inferior

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 560.

¹⁵ Hubert van den Berg, “On the Historiographic Distinction Between Historical and Neo-Avant-Garde” In: Dietrich Scheunemann (ed.), *Avant-garde – Neo-avant-garde. New Perspectives*. Amsterdam; Atlanta: Rodopi, 2005, p. 66.

¹⁶ Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire. Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 102.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁸ Paz for instance writes: “Today we witness another mutation: modern art is beginning to lose its powers of negation. For some years now its rejections have been ritual repetitions: rebellion has turned into procedure, criticism into rhetoric, transgression into ceremony. Negation is no longer creative. I am not saying that we are living the end of art: we are living the end of the *idea of modern art*.” Ibid., p. 162.

Günter Berghaus, referring to the fine arts, argues: “There was certainly nothing disturbing or scandalous about the ‘corporate modernism’ of the 1950s, which graced the walls of banks, boardrooms and bourgeois villas. The former avant-garde, which had defined itself through its opposition to society and its artistic institutions, had moved from the margins of society into the mainstream. It became an object of ‘smart investment’, was absorbed by academic institutions, and

renaissance of long worn-out techniques and even as fraud and spineless scam by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who argues that not one sentence has been formulated by the concrete poets of the 1960s which had not already been written by the Futurist F. T. Marinetti and his supporters. In "Die Aporien der Avantgarde", Enzensberger writes that while the historical avant-garde failed bravely and gloriously, the neo-avant-garde refuses to take moral responsibility for its actions, hiding behind scientific jargon and the notion of experiment, and thus fails in a cowardly way.

Jede heutige Avantgarde ist Wiederholung, Betrug oder Selbstbetrug. [...] Die historische Avantgarde ist an ihren Aporien zugrundegegangen. Sie war fragwürdig, aber nicht feige. Nie hat sie sich durch die Ausrede zu sichern versucht, was sie betreibe, sei nichts weiter als ein "Experiment"; nie hat sie sich wissenschaftlich getarnt, um für ihre Resultate nicht einstehen zu müssen. Das unterscheidet sie von jener Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung, die ihre Nachfolge angetreten hat; das macht ihre Größe aus.¹⁹

Enzensberger accuses the concrete poets of hiding the essentially arbitrary and trivial nature of their works behind a pseudo-scientific scaffold in an attempt to equip them with credibility: "Hier drückt sich Beliebigkeit in einem abgebrühten akademischen Jargon aus, der das Delirium als Seminararbeit auftischt [...]."²⁰ However, Enzensberger fails to see that there is nothing wrong with drawing upon new concepts, theories and developments in the realm of linguistics, communication studies, semiotics and philosophy of language, which allow for a much more accurate description of intentions and a more precise comprehension of the processes involving signs, signification and communication. On the contrary, it would be highly problematic were the concrete poets to ignore these developments, if they did not ingest and put to work contemporary discoveries from non-artistic spheres as well. In fact it is exactly the refined notion of the sign and signifying processes which allows the concrete poets to lift the quest to a more precise and sophisticated level of experimentation.

Former avant-garde protagonists themselves join into the chorus of condemnation too, most prominently the Dadaist Raoul Hausmann: "Renaissancen sind meist

ended up as an integral element of the culture industry." Günter Berghaus, *Avant-Garde Performance. Live Events and Electronic Technologies*. Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 69.

¹⁹ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Die Aporien der Avantgarde". In: Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Einzelheiten II. Poesie und Politik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980pp. 79-80.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 69.

aussichtslose und traurige Erscheinungen”, he claims.²¹ Hausmann accuses the neo-avant-garde not only of plagiarism, but of a lack of utopianism, and vigorously denies that it has any critical intentions whatsoever: “DADA war neben vielem anderen auch eine Protesthaltung gegenüber den bürgerlichen und intellektuellen Traditionen. Der NeoDADAismus ist dies entschieden nicht [...]”.²²

Sie wollen nichts angreifen, nichts erschüttern, nichts verhöhnen, sie sind kein Protest, sie zeigen nur, daß man ein Rezept kennt, und daß man ‘weiß’, wie das gemacht wird. Einfach die geistig-klimatische Hochdruckssphäre ist nicht die gleiche, um von der Erfindungsnotwendigkeit nicht zu sprechen.²³

Dada was the product of a very specific cultural climate, provoked by a complex web of socio-political and cultural factors, he argues, and maintains that the aesthetic techniques of the historical avant-garde movements cannot be separated and detached from the specific historical circumstances and resurrected and reinstated in an era which is entirely different from then:

Kann man aber eine solche allgemein-klimatische Situation nachmachen, sie ohne die in ihr aufgetauchten ursprünglichen Forderungen der Gesamtlage der Weltspannungen, die heute notwendigerweise andere sein müssen als damals, kann man sie restituieren?²⁴

He contends that artistic inventions are always the answer to specific cultural necessities, and that no new cultural tensions and changes have emerged which would justify new devices as radical as those of the Dadaists, or their recuperation and revival. Some sort of a universal *Zeitgeist*, a “geistiges Weltklima”, such as that which triggered the explorations of the artists of the historical avant-garde, is missing, Hausmann writes:

²¹ Raoul Hausmann, *Am Anfang war DADA* Steinbach; Gießen: Anabas Verlag Günter Kämpf, 1972, p. 155.

²² Ibid., p. 155.

Many critics share Hausmann’s view that the neo-avant-garde lacks the inherently critical motives of the historical avant-garde, for instance Andreas Huyssen, who writes: “The American postmodernist avant-garde [...] is not only the end game of avant-gardism. It also represents the fragmentation and decline of the avant-garde as a genuinely critical adversary culture.” Quoted from Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice. Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 9.

²³ Raoul Hausmann, *Am Anfang war DADA*, p. 155.

²⁴ Raoul Hausmann, *Am Anfang war DADA*, p. 155.

Alle Erfindungen werden gemacht, wenn sie notwendig werden. Dafür gibt es ein Klima. Die geistigen Klimas sind dem Hochdruck und dem Tiefdruck der Atmosphäre vergleichbar, vielleicht sind sie einfach eine geistige meteorologische Angelegenheit, die zur gleichen Zeit über Ländern und ganzen Kontinenten die gleichen Spannungen in den Hirnen der Künstler herbeiführen.

[...] Marcel Duchamp zog seit Jahren die DADAistische Konsequenz: keinerlei Kunst ausüben, wenn im kulturhistorischen Spannungsfeld kein neuer Faktor, kein neuer Zwang vorliegt, der dem entstehenden elektronenphysikalischen und astronautischen psychomorphologischen Eidos nicht entspricht.²⁵

But contrary to Hausmann's claim, one of the remarkable features of concrete poetry is exactly its independent emergence at different places all over the world at roughly the same time, which does indeed seem to point towards new factors in the "kulturhistorische Spannungsfeld" and a universal cultural climate necessitating certain poetic strategies. The experience of the Holocaust and the Third Reich alone shook humanist beliefs in their essences, profoundly destabilising presumptions about a positive and progressive development of history and humanity. It provoked an entirely new dimension of mistrust in language and triggered reflections upon the tasks, responsibilities and limitations of language and literature in general, culminating in Theodor W. Adorno's apodictic proclamation "nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch".²⁶ Moreover, there are many other new factors in the cultural field which had a substantial impact upon everyday life and changed strategies of perception and cognition and the very nature of communication: the rise of consumer culture, technological changes such as the advent and spread of the TV, the proliferation of the typewriter and the tape-recorder and the slow rise of computers, transformations of the media landscape, and a massive increase in advertisements as a result of increasingly aggressive marketing strategies and booming post-war economies.

Additionally, as Dirk Goetsche maintains, reflection upon language as well as its creative usage have to be considered against the backdrop of a completely changed horizon ever since Saussurean linguistics and Wittgenstein impacted upon them.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 155-158.

²⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft". In: Petra Kiedaisch (ed.), *Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter*. Stuttgart: Philip Reclam jun., 1995, p. 49.

²⁷ Cf. Dirk Goetsche, *Die Produktivität der Sprachkrise in der modernen Prosa*. Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1987, p. 151.

After World War II, structuralist and post-structuralist criticism re-instated and radicalised Ferdinand de Saussure's and Charles Sanders Peirce's findings, resulting in the establishment of a much more refined notion of the sign. New theories about semiotics, language and the nature of communication, as well as elements from information theory, cybernetics and media studies, substantially enlarged the body of theoretical knowledge, allowing for a more theoretically and scientifically substantiated form of language experimentation. C. A. Noble rightly points out "daß sprachliche Möglichkeiten in hohem Maße von der philosophischen und wissenschaftlichen Erforschung der Sprache selbst abhängig sind."²⁸

The questions to be addressed in this thesis remain: have the concrete poets just blindly taken over and copied strategies and techniques of the historical avant-garde, or have they elaborated them further, added new perspectives and problems, enhanced the questions with insights derived from new theories, drawing upon their very own specific cultural situation? Is concrete poetry really a poetry of post-utopia, does it lack the socio-political and critical impulse of the forerunners, which was often a significant trigger for the activity of language dissection in the historical avant-garde? What are the causes for, and motivations behind, the simultaneous and world-wide recuperation of certain techniques of language experimentation after World War II? As Foster asks:

Crucial here is the relation between *turns* in critical models and *returns* of historical practices [...]: how does a *reconnection* with a past practice support a *disconnection* from a present practice and/or a development of a new one?²⁹

Strikingly similar driving forces and factors seem to stimulate and trigger the emergence of avant-garde language experimentation both at the beginning of the 20th century and in the 1950s and 1960s. Above all, developments in the sphere of the fine arts appear to be of major significance for the poets in both stages. In fact, the exploration, dissection and fragmentation of the material and conventions of the medium came to the fore in painting before they did in literature: the Cubists were

²⁸ C.A.M. Noble, *Sprachskepsis über Dichtung der Moderne*. Munich: edition text und kritik, 1978, p. 21.

²⁹ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. x.

the first to subvert the referential and mimetic function of art to explore perspective, conventions of representation, colour, shape and line instead, and vitally inspired comparable undertakings in literature with their experiments. Wolfgang Max Faust has drawn attention to the complex process of cross-fertilisation in which the fine arts and literature were engaged at the beginning of the past century: stenciled letters and fragmented words cut from newspapers were pasted into paintings, and literature emphasised the visual aspects of linguistic signs, resulting in programmatic violations of genre boundaries and an active exchange of techniques, methods and concerns between the different artistic spheres.³⁰ In concrete poetry as well, structural and conceptual tenets and principles of the fine arts, in particular of concrete art, serve explicitly as models and inspirations for linguistic productions.

Technological inventions too seem to be important triggers for the literary and pictorial explorations in both stages of the avant-garde. At the time of the historical avant-garde, photography had perfected the task of realistic representation to a degree that painters could never hope to accomplish, and, as the Futurist painter Umberto Boccioni declared, “having perfected this, it has freed the artist from the obligation of reproducing reality exactly.”³¹ The painters began to explore the specificities of their medium and to experiment with the intrinsic aesthetic value of colour, shape, line and perspective with the intention of producing “art that no machine can imitate”, as the Futurist Giacomo Balla put it.³² Literature too, being vitally inspired by developments in the fine arts, did not remain unaffected by the repercussions triggered by photography. André Breton has pointed out that the

³⁰ Cf. Wolfgang Max Faust, *Bilder werden Worte. Zum Verhältnis von bildender Kunst und Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert oder Vom Anfang der Kunst im Ende der Künste*. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1977.

³¹ Umberto Boccioni, “Futurist Dynamism and French Painting 1913”. In: Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos*. New York: The Viking Press, 1973, p. 110.

The Berlin Dadaist Wieland Herzfelde also asserts that the paradigmatic changes of artistic agendas at the beginning of the 20th century were the result of the advent of photography and cinema: “Die Malerei hatte einst den ausgesprochenen Zweck, den Menschen die Anschauung von Dingen – Landschaften, Tieren, Bauten usw. – die sie selbst nicht mit eigenen Augen kennenlernen konnten, zu vermitteln. Diese Aufgabe haben heute Photographie und Film übernommen und lösen sie unvergleichlich viel vollkommener als die Maler aller Zeiten. Doch starb die Malerei mit dem Verlust ihres Zweckes nicht ab, sondern suchte neue Zwecke. Seitdem lassen sich alle Kunstbestrebungen dahin zusammenfassen, daß sie, so verschieden sie auch sind, gemeinsam die Tendenz haben, sich von der Wirklichkeit zu emanzipieren.” Wieland Herzfelde, “Zur Einführung in die Erste internationale Dada-Messe”. In: Karl Riha and Jörgen Schäfer (eds.), *DADA total. Manifeste, Aktionen, Texte, Bilder*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1994, p. 146.

³² Giacomo Balla, “The Late Balla – Futurist Balla 1915”. In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 206.

invention of photography has dealt a “mortal blow” to the traditional modes of expression, both in painting and in poetry.³³ Moreover, the attempt to capture artistically the new sensations of dynamism, speed and simultaneity, which were the product of inventions such as the automobile, the aeroplane and the telegraph, was a major facet in the Italian Futurists’ aesthetics, which called for a new artistic vocabulary and new aesthetic strategies.

Correspondingly, changes in dominant technology were influencing the aesthetics of concrete poetry. Eugen Gomringer argues that the concentration and radical reduction of the language material in concrete poetry mirrored contemporary developments in communication structures, which were becoming more and more reduced, formally simplified, condensed, swifter and more effective, as a result of an increasing importance of new technologies, which permeated deeper and deeper into everyday life, and the aesthetics of advertisements, mass media, and short headlines. Furthermore, the concrete poets creatively explored and depended upon the structural possibilities opened up by the recent availability and spread of cheap typewriters, and, in 1959, as the direct consequence of his aesthetic theories, Max Bense also launched the very first experiments with artificial computer-generated poetry.

Albeit in a different cultural set-up, relations to and creative impetuses received from the fine arts, the responses to technological inventions and the notion of culture in transition seem to play a similarly significant role for the concrete poets as they did for the poets of the historical avant-garde. And, rather than assuming that a change of historical and cultural circumstances must invalidate and nullify the impact and significance of certain literary strategies, one wonders whether it might not transform and amend them: the concrete poets respond to and operate in an altered cultural field, against the backdrop of a different historical, technological and theoretical horizon, and draw upon an expanded body of knowledge about signs, language and communication. The question arises whether, rather than just repeating and re-staging textual politics inaugurated by the poets of the historical avant-garde, the concrete poets instead adapt, modify and develop the techniques further to express

³³ Cf. Dietrich Scheunemann, “On photography and painting. Prolegomena to a new theory of the avant-garde”. In: Dietrich Scheunemann (ed.), *European Avant-Garde. New Perspectives*, p. 15.

and fit their own times, sensibilities and purposes, thereby both continuing and transcending the project of the historical avant-garde.

2. On Language Dissection

The most conspicuous link between the two stages of literary avant-garde production is a shared textual strategy which lies at the very heart of the poetic works: language dissection, the operation of taking language apart on different levels of linguistic organisation. Both protagonists of the historical avant-garde and concrete poets cut language into pieces, dismember it into fragments, split it into its component parts and explore its material basis, its structural organisation and the codes and conventions that govern its usage. The term “language dissection” is introduced in this thesis to denote a strategy specific to avant-garde poets with both an interventionist and an analytical dimension. It is given preference to “fragmentation”, an expression most commonly used in the context of modernist literature.³⁴ “Fragmentation” is frequently associated with the idea of mirroring a world in pieces and with the aesthetic reflection of an involuntary, characteristically modern condition – feelings of lost unity, alienation, dislocation and shattered moral and intellectual certainties. Language dissection in contrast is to bring about change rather than just to mirror it, it is an interventionist device used to uncover and change thought processes and to heighten awareness by means of deliberately disturbing the conventional order of signs. Moreover, the act of dissection is motivated by the desire to examine the inner structure of the medium, to investigate that which lies behind the surface layer. Language dissection in avant-garde poetry is an analytical tool, a device for probing into the very heart of the language system, for exploring the nature of signs and for putting in question the conventions which govern their usage.

The debate about the terminological distinction between “modernism” and “avant-garde” in general is a thorny issue: in Anglo-American criticism the terms are often

³⁴ The term dissection is also given preference over “deconstruction”, because the latter term is firmly associated with a philosophical school of thought and critical analysis. Moreover, the act of dissection takes place in poetic constructs, paradoxically not only by taking something apart, but also by presenting something new, by assembling new entities, textual realities and a new order of things. There is not only a destructive but also a constructive side to it.

conflated. In the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* for instance, “modernism” is defined as

the wide range of experimental and avant-garde trends in the literature (and other arts) of the early 20th century, including Symbolism, Futurism, Expressionism, Imagism, Vorticism, Dada, and Surrealism, along with the innovations of unaffiliated writers.³⁵

Jane Goldman has pointed out that the two terms can also signal different critical discourses and approaches as well as references to diverging bodies of work:

The French term ‘avant-garde’ suggests the European sources and guiding criticism for much of the literature of this period, and ‘Modernism’, by virtue of its American critical genesis and credentials, suggests its American slant and destination.³⁶

Matei Calinescu describes “avant-garde” as one of the five faces of modernity, and essentially considers it as a more radical, dogmatic and utopionised version of it, which borrows all its elements from the modern tradition but blows them up and carries them to the extreme.³⁷ Günter Berghaus in contrast, following Bürger, mentions two frequently cited differences. Firstly, he argues that the avant-garde explicitly attacked the institution of art and thus took a much more subversive stance towards established cultural frameworks of production, distribution and reception. Secondly, he claims that the avant-garde was more politically engaged than the modernists were.³⁸ Goldman too considers the avant-gardists to be more radical and subversive than the modernists:

Whereas avant-garde aesthetics, I would argue, might be considered at the least transgressive, if not dissident, modernist aesthetics, even under postmodernist auspices, are at most perhaps transgressive.³⁹

³⁵ Chris Baldick, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 140.

³⁶ Jane Goldman, *Modernism, 1910-1945. Image to Apocalypse*. Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 7.

³⁷ Cf. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1987, p. 96.

³⁸ Cf. Günter Berghaus, *Avant-Garde Performance. Live Events and Electronic Technologies*, pp. 15-16.

³⁹ Jane Goldman, *Modernism, 1910-1945. Image to Apocalypse*, p. 9.

In very general terms one could argue that while avant-garde poets put into play established linguistic conventions, and often neglect the referential dimension of language for the sake of the exploration of the signifiers, modernist poets tend to accept linguistic boundaries more readily as given. While the modernists too are radically breaking with stylistic and poetic conventions, they often do so within the legal parameters of language, and hold on to the idea of extra-textual meaning more firmly. Moreover, there is often a strong intertextual dimension in modernist poems, whereas avant-garde poets perceived of themselves as radically breaking with all tradition and distort the boundaries between high and low culture much more thoroughly. On yet another level, modernist poets often seem to mirror and reflect prevailing conditions, rather than intending to bring about cultural and political change. In this thesis, the term “avant-garde” is applied to all works in which language is dissected and taken apart, works in which poets programmatically break with given linguistic conventions motivated by an interventionist and analytical agenda. The terms “historical avant-garde” and “neo-avant-garde” are used to indicate different temporal stages, the former referring to the movements and individuals operating before World War II, and the latter to those writing after 1945. Of course there have been isolated instances of language dissection before the emergence of the historical avant-garde movements. Stéphane Mallarmé’s “Un Coup de Dés” from 1897 is a point in case. Mallarmé abolished the line in favour of an abstract, spatial and typographically enhanced arrangement of words on the page, and his work became one of the most crucial reference points for his successors. However, the phenomenon comes most prominently to the fore in the early decades of the 20th century. The dissection of linguistic units from text, word to singular letter and the subsequent exploration of the visual and acoustic dimension of the dismembered linguistic signs runs like a leitmotif through most of the works of the avant-garde poets. They discard customary sense, purposefully violating and disregarding syntactical, morphological and semantic rules and conventions. The French poet Guillaume Apollinaire is concerned with the biggest linguistic unit, the text, and slices random conversation fragments from their respective contexts, arranging them in a fashion that defies the laws of semantic compatibility. The Italian Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti attacks the sentence: he dissects language

on the level of grammar and frees words from the confinement of syntax. The Russian Cubo-Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov sets the cut for incision within words themselves, dismembering them into morphemic building blocks. The Zurich Dadaist Hugo Ball operates with sub-morphemic sound clusters and syllables, and the Berlin Dadaist Raoul Hausmann presents a string of singular monadic letters, isolated from the language system, which no longer fuse into any higher units. Finally, Kurt Schwitters embarks on proto-concrete and increasingly constructivist ventures, emphasising the aesthetic validity of individual letters.⁴⁰

In the early 1950s, the phenomenon re-emerges: language dissection enjoys a renaissance in post-war Europe and in South-America, where poets in the trajectory of concrete poetry begin to recuperate, take up and develop further techniques and strategies of the historical avant-garde. Concrete poetry surfaces simultaneously at different places in the world at roughly the same time. In 1952, the Swiss-Bolivian poet Eugen Gomringer, who is considered the founding father of concrete poetry and the advocate of its poetically most rigid and austere branch, writes his first *constellation*, as he calls the new structural and spatial poetic form. The very same year, Haroldo and Augusto de Campos and Décio Pignatari found the *Noigandres* group in São Paulo. The Brazilians too investigate the “verbivocovisual” aspects of language and set out to explore spatio-temporal structures.⁴¹ Around 1953, Gerhard Rühm, H.C. Artmann and Oswald Wiener form the Austrian *Wiener Gruppe*, which Konrad Bayer and Friedrich Achleitner join at a later point, and dedicate their attention to a constructivist exploration of the physically perceptible dimension of signs as well as to the conventions that govern the cultural production of meaning. Franz Mon and Max Bense also embark on their respective concrete quests in Germany in the early-mid 1950s.⁴² Initially, the poets are unaware of each other, but soon they begin to communicate and co-operate, publishing and reviewing each other

⁴⁰ It has been attempted to work with texts in the original languages as far as possible in this thesis, but, due to a lack of understanding of Italian, Russian and Portuguese, the author was obliged to use English translations in the cases of Marinetti, Khlebnikov and some works of the *Noigandres* group.

⁴¹ Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campos, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry”. In: Mary Ellen Solt (ed.), *Concrete Poetry. A World View*. Bloomington; London: Indiana University Press, 1970, p. 72.

⁴² As Mary Ellen Solt has demonstrated, there were numerous other concrete poets operating individually or in groups all over the world in countries such as Iceland, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Japan, France, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Scotland and the USA amongst others. Cf. *ibid*.

in an alternative network of distribution based on mostly self-financed magazines, journals, printing presses and gallery ventures.

In the works of these poets, a similar concentration upon and investigation of the material features of language can be detected: the visual shape and the position of words and letters on the page become crucial elements of structure. Here also the sound pattern is decisive, the signifier gains momentum; poets neglect the message-orientated function of language and refrain from anecdote and narrative for the sake of the analysis of the underlying codes and structures of the language system. Most importantly, in concrete poetry, language is taken apart once again, and here too the dissections range from the level of semantic compatibility to individual letters.

The assault upon a given order of signs – pictorial or linguistic – seems to be paradigmatic for avant-garde activities in general: the dismemberment and fragmentation of the media of usage in an attempt to expose and explore its structures and specificities can also be observed in the domain of avant-garde art, where the Cubists facet both depicted objects and the picture space, or in photomontage, where selected images are literally cut from their respective backgrounds and rearranged as shattered fragments into new compositional hierarchies. Similarly, it is discernible in avant-garde film, where the principle of montage is elevated from media-specific technical condition to deliberately chosen aesthetic practice.

This thesis seeks to explore the relationship between historical avant-garde and concrete poetry by means of investigating the significance of the shared practice of language dissection within the respective poetic frameworks: what are the motivations for and theoretical implications of language dissection in historical avant-garde and concrete poetry? Why is the attack upon a given order of signs so far reaching, what is it that is attacked along with language? What is the background situation from which language dissection springs and what other factors play a role in its emergence? Why is it that this technique is recuperated and reinstated in the early 1950s by many different poets in different places simultaneously? How do the two temporal stages relate to each other in terms of recuperation, repetition and development?

Part one of this thesis is dedicated to six case studies of language dissections in early avant-garde poetry on different linguistic levels, the respective poetic frameworks in which they are embedded and cultural and historical factors that contribute to and stimulate the emergence of the phenomenon. Chapter six also prepares the ground for the subsequent discussion of concrete poetry by introducing other relevant source for the poetics of concrete, such as constructivist tendencies as manifest in the works of Kurt Schwitters, a discussion of Theo van Doesburg's and Max Bill's conception of concrete art, and Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa's notion of the ideogram. The sample cases in part one are instrumental to the description of continuities between the historical avant-garde and concrete poetry. They are chosen with the intention of discussing paradigmatic literary productions of some of the most important and influential classical European avant-garde movements, as well as to cover different geographic centres and cultural backgrounds and, most importantly, different levels of linguistic experimentation. The chapters are arranged according to the linguistic level of dissection: they progress from the biggest linguistic unit, the text, via syntax, morphology and syllables to the smallest unit, the singular letter.

The chapters dealing with avant-garde poetry after 1945 are organised in a similar manner: here too five case studies of dissections in concrete poetry are explored, with attention to the respective poetics and declarations of intention of the poets. Concerns and issues which played a role in the emergence of language dissection in the historical avant-garde, such as developments in the fine arts and technological changes, will be re-examined as potential driving forces for the recuperation of language dissection after 1945.

Using Bense's exploration of the poetic potential of computers as a starting point, this thesis finally provides an outlook into contemporary digital poetic practice. It proposes that digital poetry be perceived as a third stage of the avant-garde, in which many concerns and techniques of the historical and the neo-avant-garde are taken up once again and lifted to a new technologically enhanced level of enquiry. By means of the creative exploitation of advanced computer technologies and new possibilities of staging, exploring and manipulating linguistic signs in digital space, digital poetry effectuates and develops further many visions of the predecessors, such as the exploration of spatial structures, interactivity, intermediality, movement and

dynamism, and open works into which the recipient can interfere.⁴³ Above all, however, here too the order of signs, together with a further dimension, namely the order of binary code, is assaulted, taken apart and de-functionalised in an act of symbolic dissection of epistemological, representational and social practices.

Adopting a comparative approach based on detailed case studies taken from different movements and temporal stages will not only establish that language dissection above all is what links the endeavours of the concrete poets to the works of their predecessors, but will also enhance the fact that this strategy holds a prominent position at the centre of the poetic frameworks of diverse groupings of the historical and the neo-avant-garde. The assault upon given linguistic orders not only unites different historical avant-garde and concrete factions, but transgresses national and temporal boundaries and can be considered as one of the most vital techniques in avant-garde poetry in general.

3. Breaking the Linguistic Contract

Language in everyday communication functions as vessel, vehicle and means of transport for the smooth conveyance of messages. Ideally, its structural organisation and material dimension, its very nature as an artificially contrived sign system based on arbitrary conventions, remains hidden behind its pragmatic function and neither transpires in spoken language nor becomes apparent in script. Signs function best when nobody perceives them as such, when the code remains unobserved. However, it has always been the task of self-reflexive literature to fight against this forgetfulness about the material basis of language, to rescue it from the realms of the functional and to reinstate it as an aesthetic entity worthy of attention.

Most poetry is not just made of language, but is essentially about language as well. Authors throughout the centuries have structured and manipulated language so as to call awareness to its material dimension by deploying figures of grammar and figures of sound and by emphasising rhythm and visual features. Yet, until the first decades of the 20th century, the material dimension of language had always been subsidiary to the semantic one: the communicative function of language had never been

⁴³ Cf. Friedrich W. Block, "Digital poetics or On the evolution of experimental media poetry". At: <http://www.netzliteratur.net/block/p0et1cs.html>.

abandoned. In the literature of the past century, the avant-garde poets were the first to disregard the signifieds for the free play of the signifiers; they were the first to give primacy to the material dimension at the cost of the semantic one.

What is more, the emphasis upon the concrete materiality of language entails by implication a problematisation and questioning of its representational, cognitive and epistemological functions. However, the avant-garde poets were by no means the first to draw attention to the limitations and shortcomings of language: In 1873, Friedrich Nietzsche already called into question the congruence of designations and things in his essay "Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne".⁴⁴ He doubted whether language was an adequate means for the expression of outer and inner realities, and asserted that language, composed of arbitrary metaphors and equally haphazard conceptual demarcations, was entirely unreliable and unconnected to truth. At the turn of the 19th century, a number of writers and thinkers expressed despair about the extent to which language seems to structure the very configuration of thought and influence and shape perception. Fritz Mauthner most prominently considered language to be the most pertinent obstacle of perception. He postulated an identity of language and thinking and thus extended language scepticism to a critique of cognition in his *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*. Consciousness itself, Mauthner argued, is structured by language, which encodes all cognition a priori into a system which is hopelessly inadequate.⁴⁵ As Goetsche has pointed out, language at

⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne". In: *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, section III, vol. 2. Edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1973, pp. 367-384.

⁴⁵ This notion has been developed further by Ludwig Wittgenstein. In 1919, Wittgenstein postulated in the *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus* that the limits of language are the limits of thinking: he perceived all epistemological problems as language problems, all philosophical confusion as language-based. The limits of our worlds, Wittgenstein argues, are determined by what can be demonstrated in language, and are thus defined by the limits of language and what is logically possible within it: "*Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt.*" Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung. Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Edited by Brian McGuinness and Joachim Schulte. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 134.

Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf put forth the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, or the idea of linguistic relativity: they proposed that perception is limited by language, that linguistic categories are tyrannical and determine and shape the way individuals perceive the world. Whorf claims that "thought is linguistic in form" and that it structures a certain view of reality and thus imposes upon experience. He maintains that a language compels and forces people to think in particular ways and thus confines and limits their world view because it prevents and inhibits certain thoughts. Cf. Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny, *Language and Reality. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, pp. 217-218.

the fin de siècle was often perceived as obstructing the perception of reality rather than representing it.⁴⁶

The language-sceptical sentiment reached its preliminary literary climax in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief" from 1902, a manifestation of the crisis of a language that is no longer thought to be identical with that which it denotes.⁴⁷ Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos despairs about the discrepancy between words and reality. The chasm between the spiritual and the material world is perceived as unbridgeable, the suitability of language to communicate experience is radically questioned. Chandos profoundly doubts its communicative and representational competence and its capability to mediate between the individual, society and reality. The essence of things, Chandos feels, can no longer be embraced with the existing range of concepts, language is unable to penetrate "ins Innere der Dinge".⁴⁸ Words seem to be spinning around themselves in a self-referential bottomless game leading nowhere: "Wirbel sind sie, in die hinabzusehen mich schwindelt, die sich unaufhaltsam drehen und durch die hindurch man ins Leere kommt."⁴⁹

Diese Begriffe, ich verstand sie wohl: ich sah ihr wundervolles Verhältnisspiel vor mir aufsteigen wie herrliche Wasserkünste, die mit goldenen Bällen spielen. Ich konnte sie umschweben und sehen, wie sie zueinander spielten; aber sie hatten es nur miteinander zu tun, und das Tiefste, das Persönliche meines Denkens, blieb von ihrem Reigen ausgeschlossen.⁵⁰

Hofmannsthal might have been as disenchanted and desperate about the condition of language as the poets of the avant-garde. However, this did not materialise in the way he treated it: he did not touch upon the structural organisation of the medium he criticised, he left its syntactical and semantic apparatus intact, never violated its codes or broke its laws. His language criticism was negotiated on a discursive, semantic level only. This discrepancy between saying and doing was to change radically with the advent of the avant-garde poets. The avant-garde poets rectified

⁴⁶ Cf. Dirk Göttsche, *Die Produktivität der Sprachkrise in der modernen Prosa*, pp. 44-51.

⁴⁷ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Ein Brief". In: Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben. Prosa II*. Edited by Herbert Steiner. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1951, pp. 7-22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

this incongruity by directly effectuating and realising their theoretical beliefs through their poetic practice. In this they differ from their predecessors: in avant-garde poetry, the critique of language and that which comes with it is not evident on the content level, but immanent in the treatment of the signifier. They perform and execute their critique poetically.

A passage from Jean-François Lyotard helps to illuminate the difference between Hofmannsthal's and the avant-garde poets' approaches: albeit in the context of a different discursive debate, namely the modernism-postmodernism one, Lyotard depicts a comparable contrast in "Réponse à la Question: Qu'est-ce que le Postmoderne?", where he differentiates between two modes of writing, one modern and one postmodern, exemplified by Marcel Proust and James Joyce respectively. Both, he argues, attempt to capture the unspeakable, but they do so on different levels of discourse:

Proust allègue l'imprésentable au moyen d'une langue intacte dans sa syntaxe et son lexique et d'une écriture qui par beaucoup de ses opérateurs appartient encore au genre de la narration romanesque. [...] Joyce fait deviner l'imprésentable dans son écriture même, dans le signifiant. La gamme des opérateurs narratifs et même stylistiques connus est mise en jeu sans souci de maintenir l'unité de tout, de nouveaux opérateurs sont expérimentés.⁵¹

Joyce, Lyotard maintains, does not accept the parameters of grammar and vocabulary as given, but transgresses and exposes them as academic forms and rituals "qui empêche que l'imprésentable soit allégué."⁵² Similarly, it is in writing itself that the avant-garde poets' stance becomes apparent: they too put into play syntactic, lexicologic and semantic operators and do not accept any set assumptions about language. The dialectic between signifier and signified is profoundly destabilised, the transparency of the signifying chain is deliberately obscured and interrupted. The avant-garde's most radical message is not communicated on the content level, but on the level of signs, in the treatment of the signifying material. Their poetic works represent the most basic withdrawal of linguistic consensus: virtually nothing in

⁵¹ Jean-François Lyotard, "Réponse à la Question: Qu'est-ce que le Postmoderne?". In: *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants. Correspondance 1982-1985*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1988, p. 30.

⁵² Ibid., p. 30.

language is accepted as given anymore, the most fundamental notions about signification are interrogated and problematised.

By means of violating the existing order of signs, the avant-garde poets tap into a well of extra-linguistic issues too. As de Saussure has pointed out in his *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, there is also a socio-political side to language. Language is essentially a social tool, a form of contract, a body of conventions adopted by society to enable a more or less precise and standardised exchange of ideas and experiences, he maintains, which is the very precondition for a smooth functioning of all operative social systems. De Saussure writes that “[...] la langue est une institution sociale”.⁵³ “[La langue] n’existe qu’en vertu d’une sorte de contrat passé entre les membres de la communauté.”⁵⁴ A break with the linguistic contract, it appears, thus also implies the withdrawal of the most basic form of social consensus.

In *La Révolution du Langage Poétique* Julia Kristeva explores the idea of the political and subversive dimension of formal textual procedures.⁵⁵ The shattering of discourse in modernist and avant-garde poetry, she argues, is not only about linguistic transgressions, but goes much deeper: what is at stake in such a signifying practice is not just language, but the explosion of phonetic, lexical and syntactic laws implies the bursting open of the epistemological, psychological and ideological boundaries of the subject, and, by implication, society.⁵⁶ In fact, Kristeva writes, every social construct is questioned and under attack along with language in such texts: “Cette pratique ne s’adresse pas, elle emporte tout ce qui fait partie du même espace pratique: des ‘unités’ humaines en procès.”⁵⁷

Kristeva formulates a position which seems to lie at the very heart of many avant-garde and neo-avant-garde textual politics, even though it is not always explicitly formulated: the notion of the inherent politics of form.⁵⁸ It seems to be one of the

⁵³ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. Edited by Charles Bally et Albert Sechehaye. Paris: Payot, 1955, p. 33.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

⁵⁵ For this thesis, the without doubt highly significant psycho-analytical dimension of Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic has been neglected for the sake of the political aspect of her argument.

⁵⁶ Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du Langage Poétique. L’Avant-Garde A La Fin Du XIXe Siècle: Lautréamont et Mallarmé*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974, pp. 98-99.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 96.

⁵⁸ The notion of the inherent politics of form has of course not gone unchallenged, and it has been criticised by numerous scholars, for example by Rita Felsky from a feminist viewpoint. Cf. Rita

major aspiration of both avant-garde and concrete poets that a revolution in poetic language is to effect a revolution elsewhere.

While Bürger is generally rather cautious about the idea of privileged form over content, and about assigning a definite political meaning to certain artistic procedures, he nevertheless follows Adorno to some degree, who argues that the non-organic form of modernist art is in itself a radical rejection of a reconciliation with false values.⁵⁹ Adorno too, though from an entirely different angle than Kristeva, advocates the emancipatory possibilities inherent in formal procedures: ideological criticism must be visible in the formal properties of a work, in its essentially non-organic fragmentary nature and its negation of synthesis, which mimetically reflects the inherent contradictions of late capitalist society. He argues that the avant-gardistic art work is the only possible expression of and protest against late-capitalist alienation, and that all semblance of coherence and totality in art is illusory and ideology tainted.

While the dismemberment of a given order of signs read according to Adorno equals the negation of reconciliation, many avant-garde and concrete poets also seem to consider the material realm of language as a point of refuge, as a pure, ideologically untainted realm. Roland Barthes encapsulated the idea of the innocence of pre-verbal linguistic material in his essay "Erté ou A la lettre", where he argues that the isolated, monadic letter is innocent, and that the crimes begin only when letters are put together to form words.⁶⁰

The focus upon the material dimension of language and the violation of a given order of signs are inseparable from and often entail a thorough scrutiny and problematisation of the representational, epistemological and social function of language. But questions remain: which specific aspects of language do the poets try to address and transgress in their respective poetic frameworks? What are the concrete motivations for and repercussions of an assault on a given order of signs? Why do poets break the linguistic contract and symbolically withdraw the most basic

Felsky, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics. Feminist Literature and Social Change*. London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989, pp. 2-7.

⁵⁹ Cf. Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, pp. 105-106; p. 127.

⁶⁰ Cf. Roland Barthes, "Erté ou A la lettre". In: Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes. Tome II. 1966-1973*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994, p. 1232.

manifestation of social consensus, the adherence to a given set of linguistic conventions, at certain moments in history?

1. GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE: IN PURSUIT OF ARTISTIC INVENTION

1.1 The Cubist Revolution

Guillaume Apollinaire's affiliation with the Parisian avant-garde painters, his theoretical involvement with and assessment of their quests, and particularly his appropriation of many of their techniques in his own works, can be considered as paradigmatic for the close-knit alliance of avant-garde art and literature in general. The intricate interconnectedness of explorations in fine art and literature runs like a leitmotif through both avant-garde and neo-avant-garde manifestations. Predominantly, it is the painters who are the agents of artistic change, who lead the way into unexplored territory and discover new formal languages. Above all, it was the Cubists' exploration of the picture space, their abandonment of the conventions of the vanishing point Renaissance perspective, and their fragmentation and faceting of objects into overlapping geometrical planes that set in motion avant-garde explorations of the material basis of the media of usage in all the arts.¹

Apollinaire met Picasso in 1904, and became an enthusiastic promoter of the Cubists and various other avant-garde artists from that point on. Passionately celebrating the achievements of modern art in various articles, essays and reviews, he emerged as an influential and charismatic figure in the pre-war Parisian art scene. The Cubists, however, were not the only ones to benefit from his criticism: it was reciprocally advantageous, for Apollinaire himself was highly inspired by the Cubists' explorations and employed various techniques comparable to those of the painters in his own poetry. He was thus among the first to embark on a crucial interdisciplinary alliance affecting the aesthetics of many avant-garde and neo-avant-garde works yet to come.

The radical break with age-old conventions of perspective and illusionist artistic representation that marks the beginning of the 20th century revolution in the arts, commonly considered to be initiated by Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger" (O.J. 1967), painted between 1906-1907, was among other factors triggered by technological

¹ Cubism did not, however, emerge from a cultural vacuum, and the Cubists too built upon explorations of those who preceded them, most notably the Post-Impressionists' and Paul Cézanne's works.

changes and inventions, which substantially altered and affected everyday life.² S. I. Lockerbie observes “a change of mood that stemmed ultimately from the rapid technological advances of the early years of the twentieth century” and declares that inventions such as the motorcar, the aeroplane, cinema, telegraphy and radio communication produced “a new tempo in the arts and a general desire for artistic change.”³ Traditional artistic means and forms of expression suddenly seemed incompatible with a drastically altered sensibility and a new, much faster pace of life. One technological innovation in particular seems crucial for the drastic transformation of the artistic landscape: Dietrich Scheunemann argues that not one common intention, as Peter Bürger has proposed, but rather a common challenge caused the avant-gardist revolution in the arts, namely “the challenge which the advances of new technical media, in particular photography and film, posed to traditional art forms and the traditional understanding of art.”⁴

Technological inventions in general and photography in particular were indeed important factors, though not the only ones, in eliciting avant-gardist experimentation. Photography, though already invented in the 1830s, proliferated rapidly at the beginning of the 20th century and became both adversary and liberator for painters. They could now start to abolish the mimetic project, the exact depiction of reality, and search for other modes of expression, since light, with the help of a technical apparatus, could draw reality more perfectly than they would ever be able to. Their hands were freed from the task of the exact representation of nature, and they could thus venture into new artistic territory and explore their materials. Illusionistic depictions of reality were suddenly discredited and no longer perceived as key objectives. Picasso proposed that a painter should above all invent and create, and not just simplistically copy nature.⁵

² Cf. Harold Osborne (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 434: “[Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J.)] is now seen by art critics not only as a crucial achievement in Picasso’s personal development but as the most important single landmark in the development of contemporary painting and as the herald of CUBISM.”

³ S.I. Lockerbie, “Introduction”. In: Guillaume Apollinaire, *Calligrammes. Poems of Peace and War (1913-1916)*. Edited by S. I. Lockerbie and Anne Hyde Greet. Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1980, p. 3.

⁴ Dietrich Scheunemann, “On Photography and painting”, p. 16.

⁵ Cf. Pepe Karmel, *Picasso and the Invention of Cubism*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 99.



Pablo Picasso, "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon", 1906-1907

Picasso's "Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon" is the first picture in which the abandonment of Leon Battista Alberti's central perspective and a reworking of the pictorial space became manifest. The mask-like faces of three of the five depicted women, presumably prostitutes, who present their bodies between a mix of curtains and drapery, are crudely distorted; noses are depicted in profile in faces which face the front; the head of the crouching bottom right figure faces the viewer even though the body points the other way and a crescent-shaped slice of melon intrudes brusquely into the picture space. The simultaneous representation of multiple viewpoints, which is to become characteristic for Cubism, is inaugurated here. The illusion of three-dimensionality and depth is deliberately rejected.

In ensuing works such as "Violin and Anchor", painted in 1912, Picasso dissects the depicted objects much more radically: they are broken down into overlapping geometrical planes and intersecting facets in shades of grey and brown, and the spatial distinction between background, centre and foreground is blurred. Objects and bodies are opened up, faceted and dismembered, and the pictorial space is radically redefined. Pepe Karmel asserts that "Picasso's revolutionary innovation was to pierce this 'closed form', so that the body opened into the space around it,

while space flowed into and through the body.”⁶ Moreover, a geometrical organisation of the fragmented planes along a “Cubist grid”, a scaffold of vertical and horizontal lines, becomes obvious. Only remnants of realistic detail, scattered clues, remain, such as the left arrow-topped arm of an anchor, the head of a violin, the f-shaped sound holes, a glass and a pipe.



Pablo Picasso, “Violin and Anchor”, 1912

These realistic residues, as Daniel Kahnweiler has pointed out, were to serve as a “stimulus” for the viewer, evoking memories of the object which the viewer would try to project onto the fragments assembled in the picture.⁷ The titles work along similar lines, encouraging viewers to search for a specific object, like an anchor, in the pictorial shards. Karmel rightly draws attention to this co-existence of abstract and realistic elements: “What [...] seemed subversive in Cubism was precisely its impure combination of abstraction and representation.”⁸ This tension above all was

⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸ Ibid., p. vii.

what mobilised and forced the viewer into an unknown degree of active participation in the generation of meaning. Pictures had to be decoded rather than just seen. Moreover, “Violin and Anchor” has been invaded by linguistic and numeric signs. Stencilled letters, numbers and word fragments seem to float in an indefinite picture space. Some can be deciphered, like “[H]AVRE” and “[HON]FLEUR”, others can not. These seemingly random insertions of linguistic and numeric symbols, as Robert Rosenblum has speculated, seem to point out that painterly forms and shapes, the graphic symbols of painting, are in fact equally arbitrary, and that the pictures could thus present a “decisive rejection of one of the fundamentals of Western painting since the Renaissance, namely, that a picture presents an illusion of perceived reality.”⁹

In “Sur la peinture”, the first chapter of “Les Peintres cubistes. Méditations esthétiques”, Apollinaire corroborates this idea and delineates the crux of the Cubists’ innovations, that is the departure from mimesis towards an art of conception, towards free creation liberated from the bond of representation: “Ce qui différencie le cubisme de l’ancienne peinture, c’est qu’il n’est pas un art d’imitation, mais un art de conception qui tend à s’élever jusqu’à la création.”¹⁰ Apollinaire celebrates this turn as an approximation of the divine. Free creation is of much higher merit than the mere imitation and reproduction of nature, a task, he maintains disparagingly, which can now be left to photographers: “Chaque divinité crée à son image; ainsi des peintres. Et les photographes seuls fabriquent la reproduction de la nature.”¹¹ Cubism, according to Apollinaire, is an art of conception, the art of painting new configurations with elements borrowed not from visual but from conceptual reality:

Ces peintres, s’ils observent encore la nature, ne l’imitent plus et ils évitent avec soin la représentation de scènes naturelles observées et reconstituées par l’étude.

⁹ Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁰ Guillaume Apollinaire, “Les Peintres cubistes. Méditations esthétiques”. In: Guillaume Apollinaire, *Oeuvres complètes de Guillaume Apollinaire*, vol. 4. Edited by Michel Décaudin. Paris: André Balland and Jacques Lecat Gallimard, 1966, p. 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

La vraisemblance n'a plus aucune importance, car tout est sacrifié par l'artiste aux vérités, aux nécessités d'une nature supérieure qu'il suppose sans la découvrir.¹²

The necessities of a higher nature are the principal objective now, and resemblance to ordinary nature can thus be neglected. The focus of emphasis in Cubist painting has wandered from what is presented towards the very activity of presentation itself and the relationship between the depicted objects: "Le sujet ne compte plus ou s'il compte c'est à peine."¹³ And indeed: the Cubists tend to prefer neutral subject matter, like glasses, guitars, violins and figures, and these come in muted grey-brown colour schemes, so that all attention can be directed to the methods of presentation, to the signifiers rather than the signifieds.



Pablo Picasso, "Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass", 1912

The relation between signifier and signified, signs and actual objects, is thematised even more explicitly in the *papiers collés*, invented by George Braque in the summer

¹² Ibid., p. 18.

¹³ Ibid.

of 1912.¹⁴ “Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass”, a collage by Picasso, also from 1912, contrasts material deployed for the representation of objects, like the piece of wood-grained wallpaper cut partly in the shape of a guitar, and three other cut-out pieces of different paper representing the neck, the sound hole and the bottom of the instrument, with material that represents only itself, like the piece of newspaper at the bottom left corner. A sheet of music features the signs for sounds, and the drawn image of a wineglass is glued underneath it. All these elements are pasted onto decorative wallpaper with flowers. Here, Picasso contrasts objects with signs for and representations of objects, decontextualised real-life materials with pictorial depictions, and autonomous linguistic and musical signs with graphic signs which designate something other than themselves. Marjorie Perloff writes that each element in a collage has a dual function: “it refers to an external reality even as its compositional thrust is to undercut the very referentiality it seems to assert.”¹⁵ However, one could even speak of a triple function, for collage elements refer not only to an external reality and become components of a new compositional hierarchy, but also represent themselves and their concrete material features.

The collage principle, in fact one of the major artistic innovations of the period, was to furnish all major avant-garde movements – not only in painting, but also in literature. The fusion of verbal and pictorial elements, the blurring of the distinction between different sign systems and artistic genres, cutting and pasting, the juxtaposition of fragments taken from heterogeneous backgrounds and the insertion of real-life fragments, are constantly recurring motifs and a symptom of a general paradigmatic change initiated by the Cubists: art becomes more and more self-reflective and analytical and concentrates on the exploration and thematisation of its

¹⁴ However, the Futurist painter Gino Severini alleges that it was neither Braque nor Picasso who came up with the collage concept, but Apollinaire. Apollinaire, according to Severini, proposed the new technique both to himself and to Picasso. Severini recalls in a letter: “As regards the so-called *papiers collés* I can tell you with precision that they were born in 1912 in the zone of Montmartre. As I remember it, Apollinaire suggested the idea to me after having spoken of it to Picasso, who immediately painted a small still-life onto which he applied a small piece of waxed paper (the type that was used for the tablecloths in the bistros of Paris). [...] The reason for which Apollinaire gave us these suggestions, as I remember them from conversations of a later date, were: in the first place, the need, at that time, to comprehend the sense of a more profound and secret inner reality which would have been born from the *contrast* of materials employed directly as things placed in *juxtaposition* to lyrical elements.” Quoted from Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment. Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 45-46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

materials, conventions and codes. Colour, shape, line and plane are emancipated from their bonds to denotation and gain an aesthetic validity of their own. The exploration of the material becomes self-sufficient subject matter.

Correspondingly, the exploration and analytic dissection of the material becomes a major theme in literature as well. Not only do the protagonists of the major avant-garde movements at the beginning of the 20th century mostly operate in the fields of both verbal and fine arts, but artists and writers are involved in a lively exchange of techniques, materials and quests. As Faust has outlined, these interdisciplinary alliances have striking impacts upon avant-garde aesthetics.¹⁶ The Cubists insert letters, words, sentences and newspaper fragments into their pictures; literature explores the visual dimension of language, exploits typography, the use of photography and graphics. Literary texts adopt techniques of the plastic arts: montage and collage, dissection and abstraction. Writers too cut and paste, incorporate ready-made materials, prefabricated elements and decontextualised fragments. Both Apollinaire's *poèmes conversations* and his *calligrammes* can be considered as exemplary for this reciprocal merging of techniques and quests in many respects.

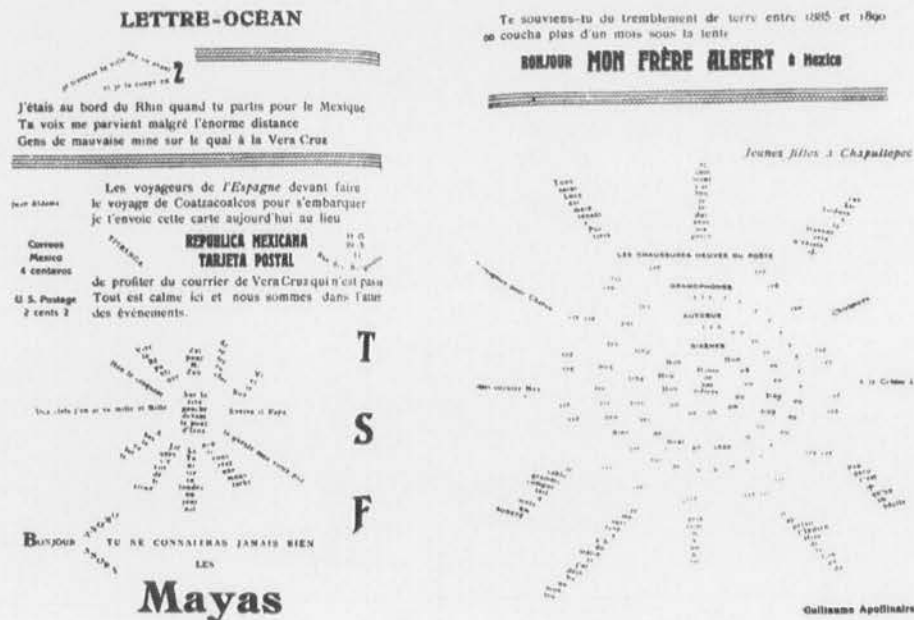
1.2 The *Calligrammes*

Apollinaire's famous declaration "Et moi aussi je suis peintre" was originally intended as title for a collection of visual and figurative poems written in 1914, which he called *calligrammes*.¹⁷ The painterly qualities of these *calligrammes* are manifest in many respects: above all, in their often figurative arrangements, in their emphasis upon the visual dimension of language, in their creative exploration of space and in the abandonment of linear structures. The generic conventions of painting and literature are deliberately subverted and blurred: while literature normally advances linearly, and has to be decoded successively, sign for sign, painting operates spatially and can be perceived simultaneously, at a glance. In Apollinaire's *calligrammes*, however, language can be decoded both spatially and successively: it can be read and looked at at the same time.

¹⁶ Cf. Wolfgang Max Faust, *Bilder werden Worte*, p. 7.

¹⁷ *Calligramme* is a portmanteau word coined by Apollinaire: it consists of a fusion of "calligraphy" and "ideogram".

In most *calligrammes*, language is arranged figuratively in the shape of concrete objects.¹⁸ However, Apollinaire's first *calligramme*, "Lettre Océan", written in May 1914, remained his most innovative one. Unlike the others, it is not mimetic, both the visual and the sound dimension of language are explored much more boldly, and theme and style are less lyrical in the conventional sense.



Guillaume Apollinaire, "Lettre Océan", 1914

In "Lettre Océan", moreover, the influence of Italian Futurist aesthetics is manifest in many aspects, particularly in the use of onomatopoeia and expressive typography.¹⁹ Apollinaire had been in close contact with the Italian Futurists, and wrote a futurist

¹⁸ However, Apollinaire was by no means the first to exploit the visual dimension of script. As Jeremy Adler and Ulrich Ernst have demonstrated, a long-standing tradition of visual poetry exists which can be traced back as far as Simeas from Rhodos wing-shaped poems written in 300 BC. Figurative poetry also enjoyed a major revival during the age of Baroque. Cf. Jeremy Adler and Ulrich Ernst, *Text als Figur. Visuelle Poesie von der Antike bis zur Moderne*. Weinheim: VCH, 1987.

What radically differentiates the avant-garde explorations of the visual dimension from these earlier works, however, is that all of the previous visual poems were mimetic: they imitated the shapes of concrete objects, and, moreover, adhered to strict formal poetic principles and dealt with conventional subject matter. Mallarmé created the first abstract visual poem in 1897, "Un Coup de Dés", and thus inaugurated the modern phase of visual poetry. Apollinaire, though many of his *calligrammes* are figurative too, often used handwriting and also created some non-mimetic *calligrammes*. Moreover, his shaped poems are not solidly filled and are written in free verse.

¹⁹ Cf. Willard Bohn, *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry 1914-1928*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 13-14.

manifesto himself in 1913, “L’Antitradition futuriste”. Moreover, the Futurists’ impact is not only observable formally, but also on the level of content. “Lettre Océan” pays homage to the Eiffel tower, which was built for the Universal Exhibition of 1889 and served as a radio station from 1903 onwards. It was *the* icon of modernism, a symbol for modern architecture, the use of new materials and above all for modern communication technologies and the notion of an interconnected, linked world.²⁰

The letters “TSF” signify “télégraphie sans fil”, “wireless communication”, the undulating lines alluding to both radio waves and the ocean. Most importantly, as Lockerbie and Anne Hyde Greet point out, the two prominent circular word-figures at the centre of each page are arranged around references to the Eiffel tower, “identified in the first circle by its geographical position, in the second by its height.”²¹ The circular shapes themselves, they argue, represent “radio communication with radio waves departing in all directions from the transmitters in the Eiffel Tower”.²²

“Lettre Océan” furthermore features fragments of correspondence from Apollinaire and his brother Albert, postcard stamps, three sets of undulating lines, various references to Mexico, as well as some political and anti-clerical remarks and allusions to some of Apollinaire’s friends. In the sun-shaped radiating circle on the right, numerous monosyllabic fragments evoke diverse sounds. As Willard Bohn suggests, “cré cré” may allude to the sounds of “les chaussures neuves du poète”, “zzzzzz” to the scratching noises of a gramophone, and “hou hou hou” to those of a howling siren.²³ The inner concentric circles on the right side seem to be onomatopoeic renderings of the sounds of modern life. The sequences forming the unfolding rays are taken directly from the repertoire of typical city noises and sights:

²⁰ Telegraphy is an important motive in many other *calligrammes* as well: Apollinaire inserted the drawn image of a telegraphy pole into “Voyage”, and in “2e Canonier Conducteur” he depicted the Eiffel tower mimetically.

²¹ S.I. Lockerbie and Anne Hyde Greet, “Commentary”. In: Guillaume Apollinaire, *Calligrammes*, p. 381.

²² Ibid. At the same time, the right-hand shape with its concentric circles could also allude to a gramophone record, especially since the word “gramophone” features explicitly and in capital letters.

²³ Cf. Willard Bohn, *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry 1914-1928*, p. 13.

they are cut-out stereotypical utterances from policemen, railway officers and bus-drivers, snatches from a food menu, a part of an advertisement.²⁴

Language here fulfils two functions at once: it conveys both semantic and visual information. The language code takes on board an additional function, the task of pictorial signs, by supplying concrete graphic shapes along with a textual message. The poem seems to suggest pictorially that the Eiffel tower, the ultimate icon of new communication technology, lies at the centre of the modern universe, broadcasting its message across the globe.

Conceptually, the *calligrammes* constitute an attempt to capture the nature of simultaneity, an issue that became increasingly important at the beginning of the past century. "In the streets and cafés [the modern subject's] senses are assailed by a kaleidoscopic multiplicity of sights, sounds, and sensations", Lockerbie maintains.²⁵ To be able to mirror such a multiple form of consciousness, Lockerbie argues further, it seemed necessary to abandon linear and discursive structures from poetry, for the successive arrangement of events was simply no longer compatible with expressing the new sensation of multiple simultaneous impressions. A friend of Apollinaire wrote as early as 1914 that it was indeed inevitable that "our intelligence become accustomed to understanding synthetico-ideographically instead of analytico-discursively."²⁶

In the article "Simultanisme-Librettisme," published in the same issue of *Les Soirées de Paris* in which "Lettre-Océan" appeared in 1914, Apollinaire reflects upon different ways of expressing simultaneity in literature. In his earlier poetry, especially in the *poèmes conversations*, he aspired to conceptual simultaneism, trying to "habituer l'esprit à concevoir un poème simultanément comme une scène de la vie".²⁷ In his *calligrammes*, in contrast, he intends to

[habituer] l'œil à lire d'un seul regard l'ensemble d'un poème, comme un chef d'orchestre lit d'un seul coup les notes superposées dans la partition, comme on voit d'un seul coup les éléments plastiques et imprimés d'une affiche.²⁸

²⁴ Cf. S.I. Lockerbie and Ann Hyde Greet, "Commentary", pp. 381-382.

²⁵ S.I. Lockerbie, "Introduction", p. 3.

²⁶ Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁷ Quoted from Willard Bohn, *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry 1914-1928*, p. 18.

²⁸ Quoted from *ibid.*

Bohn maintains that the “change in emphasis from the mind to the eye, from simultaneous conception to simultaneous perception, was a large step to take.”²⁹ He perceives the *calligrammes* as the “logical development” of techniques explored previously in the conversation poems, and argues that the *calligrammes* represent “a more determined effort to achieve simultaneity in poetry.”³⁰ However, the theoretical implications of Apollinaire’s technique of language dissection in his *poèmes conversations* are at least as radical as those of his visual explorations, if not even more so.

1.3 *Poème conversation*: “Lundi Rue Christine”

“Lundi Rue Christine” was initially published in *Les Soirées de Paris*, a literary review founded by friends of Apollinaire, in December 1913, and later in the collection *Calligrammes. Poèmes de la paix et de la guerre (1913-1916)* in 1918.³¹ Apollinaire was constantly searching for potential publishers, and not only frequently published his poems in other independent avant-garde magazines, but also created, like many other avant-garde poets after him, his own outlets.³²

“Lundi Rue Christine” belongs to a group of poems classified as *poèmes conversations*, a name alluding to the material from which they are composed: fragmented snatches from conversations. Lockerbie maintains that this label “refers to the fact that frequent use is made of snippets of spoken language, assembled from what seems to be unrelated and disconnected conversations being held in some public place.”³³

“Lundi Rue Christine” consists of 48 lines written in free verse mainly organised in stanzas. The formal layout of the poem is rather traditional, particularly if compared to the visually much more challenging *calligrammes*: the poem is arranged in left-aligned lines, the first letter of each line is in uppercase, and it is divided into stanzas

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *Les Soirées de Paris* was founded in February 1912 by André Billy and other friends of Apollinaire, mainly to give him a forum for the publication of his poems. Apollinaire became chief editor in September 1913. He also published various poems in other avant-garde magazines, such as Reverdie’s *Nord-Sud*, Picabia’s *391*, and Albert-Birot’s *Sic*.

³² Cf. Roger Little, *Guillaume Apollinaire*. London: The Athlone Press, University of London, 1976, p. 4.

³³ S. I. Lockerbie, “Introduction”, pp. 4-5.

of irregular sizes. However, the seemingly conventional layout is treacherous: the stanzas already defy the basic characteristics of stanzas, namely some concord on the content level that justifies their formal arrangement. Punctuation too is entirely omitted.

The title “Lundi Rue Christine” ascribes the subsequent lines to a particular temporal and spatial setting.³⁴ The scenery is a café with rather mixed clientele, as one can conclude from the plurality of different linguistic styles, ranging from formal via colloquial to slang. People from diverse backgrounds seem to be present: ladies in fur, a traveller and some men planning a coup. The first stanza could be read as the planning of a criminal episode. However, a second look suggests that the seemingly unifying theme is already undermined and rendered unstable by another possible meaning:

La mère de la concierge et la concierge laisseront tout passer
Si tu es un homme tu m'accompagneras ce soir
Il suffirait qu'un type maintînt la porte cochère
Pendant que l'autre monterait

Alternatively, the first two lines could be read as the proposal of a prostitute to a man to visit her in her room. Line 2, “Si tu es un homme tu m'accompagnera ce soir” could consequently either be addressed to a man invited to visit a woman, or to a man asked to take part in a criminal coup. Lines 3 and 4, however, feature an enjambed line: the sentence and grammatical structure runs over from one line to the next. Here, unlike in most other lines, the cohesive link “pendant” stabilises the relation between lines 3 and 4 and fixes their meaning. But as throughout the poem, both the identities of speaker and addressee as well as the context from which the lines are taken remain obscure. The multifunctional second line is paradigmatic for the structure of the poem as a whole: individual lines are adaptable to different

³⁴ Jacques Dyssord, a friend of Apollinaire, recalls the birth of the poem. On an evening in 1913, the last night before his departure to Tunis, Dyssord, a friend and Apollinaire visited a café in *Rue Christine*. They were the only ones there, save for a redheaded waitress, and Apollinaire scribbled down fragments of their conversations. The café, Dyssord himself, the waitress, travel, departure and Tunis are indeed recurring motives. Cf. Lucien Dällenbach, “Das Bruchstück und der Reim. Zu Apollinaire’s ‘Lundi Rue Christine’, einem angeblichen Konversationsgedicht”. In: Rainer Warning and Winfried Wehle (eds), *Lyrik und Malerei der Avantgarde*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1989, p. 31.

semantic constellations simultaneously, their meaning remains unstable, just as lines and shapes often seem to denote more than one object or shape in Picasso's paintings.

The lines of "Lundi Rue Christine" can be divided into three different categories: fragments from conversations, sensual observations of the visual and acoustic surroundings, and authorial self-reflective comments. The majority of lines are cut-out sequences from conversations about diverse everyday problems. Various discourses and themes overlap: the motif of travel is present, the theme of a planned voyage to Tunis re-appears, someone studies a timetable. A meal is being served, crêpes are eaten. A game is played, a cat walks through the café, gossip is exchanged about the love life of the red-haired waitress. Someone owes his landlady money; a lady maintains that she does not own a fur coat. Someone has nothing but a little maid. However, the origin of those conversations is lost and the context is deliberately abandoned. Speaking subject and addressee are equally mysterious, as anonymous voices from different speakers alternate. "Louise a oublié sa fourrure/ Moi je n'ai pas de fourrure et je n'ai pas froid" for instance could be ascribed to a female speaker, whereas the other speakers appear to be men. Different linguistic registers are employed, ranging from slang ("Vous êtes un mec à la mie de pain"), through colloquial ("Si tu es un homme tu m'accompagneras ce soir") to formal language ("Ces crêpes étaient exquis"). The poem is multi-perspectival, with speakers constantly switching.

Those lines that are not snatches from conversation are mostly glimpses of perception, visual observations and acoustic sensations. Visual impressions of the surroundings are frequently inserted between the conversation snatches, like line 5 ("Trois becs de gaz allumés") and line 11 ("Des piles de soucoupes des fleurs un calendrier"). A textual subject is observing the scenery, registering and documenting the surrounding:

Pim pam pim [...]
Six glaces s'y dévisagent toujours [...]
Le Danois fume sa cigarette en consultant l'horaire
Le chat noir traverse la brasserie [...]
La fontaine coule
Robe noire comme ses ongles [...]
La bague en malachite

Those statements are mostly grammatically incomplete predications, which read like stage directions. They have the air of rough sketches, like a crude draft or preliminary notes. Whether they are spoken, written, thoughts or perceptions remains unclear. They contribute to a sensuous portrait of the atmosphere of the café, with both visual and acoustic sensations. The mobile, roving perspective and the oscillation between observations and conversation fragments culminate in a complex picture of a café-scenery. The boundaries between inside and outside, speech, imagination, perception and authorial comment are often blurred, as Hans Robert Jauss has emphasised.³⁵ Apollinaire presents a “myriad of impressions” – simultaneous sounds, sights, thoughts and sensations, depicting all aspects contributing to the atmosphere of a particular moment in time. In this sense, the poem is a multi-perspectival portrait of a moment in time.

Apollinaire even adds a further dimension: by means of commenting on the verbal construct outlining this scenery, he unmasks its status of artificiality and directs the attention to the poetic materials and codes. “Ça a l’air de rimer” is a member of this third category of verses, the self-reflective comments. It is an insertion of meta-language, an ironic, even mocking remark, gently ridiculing the reader’s quest for sense and coherence.³⁶ Of course the poem does not “rhyme” at all – neither literally nor figuratively. Semantic compatibility is intentionally abandoned. Verse 16, “Six glaces s’y dévisagent toujours”, may allude to the intrinsically aporetic nature of the poem – no stable external signifieds outside the verbal construct rescue the recipient from the game of internal instability and transience of meaning. The reader is always thrown back into the architecture of juxtaposed fragments and the attention is thus redirected to the poem’s material: dissected language segments that have more or less lost their stable referential function. The textual subject analyses its own activity,

³⁵ Cf. Hans Robert Jauss, *Die Epochenschwelle von 1912. Guillaume Apollinaire: “Zone” und “Lundi Rue Christine”*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1986, p. 17.

³⁶ Cf. Lockerbie and Greet: “The invitation to become involved is highlighted by the presence in the text of one or two lines that can be interpreted as ironic or teasing remarks addressed to the reader, inducing him to become more aware of the literary ‘game’ and to take part in it. This interpretation is further encouraged by the formal arrangement of the text. Where logically an undifferentiated mass of phrases might have been expected, there is instead a division into verse paragraphs, creating a grouping of lines that seem to hang together around a common idea or situation and thus provide a stimulus to interpretation.” S.I. Lockerbie and Ann Hyde Greet, “Commentary”, p. 378.

consciously organises the material and comments on the arrangement. It oscillates continually between its role of collector, compiler and arranger, between its function as acoustic and visual observer and self-reflective commentator.

1.4 Rendering Referents Unstable or The Dissection of Discourse

Language in “Lundi Rue Christine” is dissected on the level of the biggest linguistic unit, discourse, which is defined as any connected unit of language longer than one sentence marked by coherence and cohesion. Coherence, the degree to which a discourse makes sense, its underlying logical organisation and connectedness, is more or less abandoned in Apollinaire’s poem. Cohesive links, the grammatical devices that serve to provide connectedness and structure of the textual body, are almost entirely omitted too. Often, the verses remain monadic and can neither be unambiguously related to each other nor integrated into a coherent whole. By means of de-contextualisation, formerly functional statements become ambiguous, enigmatic and suggestive. Lines are broken out of meaningful sequences, deprived of their functional value and lose their capacity to carry an unequivocal cognitive message. The relationship between the fragmented statements often remains unstable; every certainty is transient and undermined by the next line, hence the connection between the verses is open to continual redefinition. Sometimes a couple of lines seem to belong directly together:

Je dois fiche près de 300 francs à ma probloque
Je préférerais me couper le parfaitement que de les lui donner [...]
Une fois là il me présente un gros bonhomme
Qui me dit
Écoutez c’est charmant
A Smyrne à Naples en Tunisie

More often, however, they appear to be singular isolated statements, or at least to be interrupted by such statements, and all connecting efforts on the side of the reader remain ultimately speculative and subjective choices between possible paths through the textual network. Line 34 for instance (“Écoute Jacques c’est très sérieux ce que je vais te dire”) could be related to line 37 (“Je n’ai qu’une petite bonne”), or to lines 41/42 (“Écoutez c’est charmant/ A Smyrne à Naples en Tunisie”), or even to line 46 (“L’Honneur tient souvent à l’heure que marque la pendule”). This combination-

game could be played endlessly. Numerous different stories can be derived from numerous different combinatory constellations, none of them is definite. Timothy Mathews outlines the elusiveness of Apollinaire's juxtapositions: "Not only does any one line elude definitive interpretation, but any group can also be read in terms of any number of different tones and intents."³⁷ Meaning in "Lundi Rue Christine" is essentially unstable and in flux.

Apollinaire, by means of cutting out and rearranging disparate linguistic sequences, renders formerly unequivocal everyday statements indefinite. They are now remnants of a whole that is irretrievably and intentionally lost. Apollinaire deletes the frame of reference and with it all consecutive and causal motivations. In "Lundi Rue Christine", the principle of "double syntax", where a word or phrase can grammatically belong to either the given or the next line, is thus extended onto the semantic level. The meaning of the isolated statements depends on and changes with the subsequent lines. This structural instability is not only produced by the absence of cohesive links but also by the omission of punctuation, as Greet and Lockerbie have argued.³⁸ Apollinaire effectively pulls the rug of certainty from underneath the readers' feet and thus forces them to re-examine poetic conventions in particular and language in general.

The fragments, however, are not entirely disconnected – there are recurring motives and some detectable logical relations. The Dane of line 23 for instance ("Le Danoise fume sa cigarette en consultant l'horaire") could well be the first person speaker of line 15 ("Je partirai à 20h. 27") as well as the Dane studying the timetable in line 36 ("Compagnie de navigation mixte"). Perhaps the remnants of coherence are just false incentives, promising a unity that does not exist, and ridiculing the teleological expectations of the recipient. On the other hand, the bits and pieces of consistency could also be stimuli to encourage combinatorial endeavours. The structural ambiguity, and the undecidability in terms of connectedness, demand a high degree of organisational efforts on the part of the reader. Greet and Lockerbie point out that the implications of this structural specificity are indeed far-reaching:

³⁷ Timothy Mathews, *Reading Apollinaire*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987, p. 155.

³⁸ Cf. S.I. Lockerbie and Ann Hyde Greet, "Commentary", p. 373.

It focuses his [the reader's] attention on the text as a self-sufficient object, without any necessary referential function, and, by challenging him to discover significance and possible connections in the apparently gratuitous phrases, leads him to participate in the elaboration of possible meanings.³⁹

They argue further that the reader is always thrown back onto the linguistic network precisely because attempts to seek meaning on the semantic level are futile, because the reader “is defeated in his attempt to find an immediate discursive meaning linking the various fragments”, and because the internal echoes and relationships of the language fragments among themselves provide the actual aesthetic pleasure.⁴⁰ The reader is indeed forced to proceed away from searching for meaning on the semantic level, since coherence there is almost absent, towards pursuing it on the level of material. The absence of definite links and connections, and the elliptical juxtapositions and semantic discontinuities, call for interactive reception strategies. “Lundi Rue Christine” is a paradigmatic example of a poem that demands a high degree of operative involvement on the part of the recipient to produce meaning, an aspect that will be of importance in many other avant-garde poems.

1.5 Word and Image: Points of Convergence

The parallels between Apollinaire's poetic explorations and cubist techniques are numerous and striking: they are manifest in a conscious reaction to the advent of new technologies, in the deployment of ready-made real life materials, in a preoccupation with simultaneity and multi-perspectivity, a concern with space, the use of double syntax, a focus upon the material rather than the content and, above all, in the activity of dissection.

Like the Cubists, Apollinaire too reacted to changes in dominant technology. He not only explicitly thematised telegraphy in numerous poems, but also implicitly responded to the challenge posed by inventive breakthroughs in the technical reproducibility of speech – the vast growth of the recording industry, the proliferation of phonographs and gramophones – as well as to the emergence of the cinema. In his 1917 lecture “L'Esprit nouveau et les Poètes”, Apollinaire reflects upon the impact of the new modes of communication upon literature, which, he

³⁹ Ibid., p. 378.

⁴⁰ S. I. Lockerbie, “Introduction”, p. 6.

argues, necessitate a break with tradition and new means of expression. He claims that, just as photography freed the painters' hands from the task of mimesis, the phonograph and the cinema will free the poets' hands:

Il eût été étrange qu'à une époque où l'art populaire par excellence, le cinéma, est un livre d'images, les poètes n'eussent pas essayé de composer des images pour les esprits méditatifs et plus raffinés qui ne se contentent point des imaginations grossières des fabricants de films. Ceux-ci se raffineront, et l'on peut prévoir le jour où le phonographe et le cinéma étant devenus les seules formes d'impression en usage, les poètes auront une liberté inconnue jusqu'à présent.⁴¹

Michel Butor credits Apollinaire with being among the first to reflect poetically the cultural revolution caused by new techniques of reproduction and transmission:

Apollinaire a été un des premiers à comprendre poétiquement qu'une révolution culturelle était impliquée par l'apparition de nouveaux moyens de reproduction et de transmission, que le phonographe, le téléphone, la radio et le cinéma (sans parler de la télévision et de l'enregistrement magnétique), moyens de conserver et diffuser le langage ou l'histoire sans passer par l'intermédiaire de l'écriture, obligeait à poser sur celle-ci un regard nouveau, à interroger cet objet fondamental de notre civilisation qu'est le livre.⁴²

In avant-garde literature, just as in painting, the task of exact reproduction of real life scenarios was neglected for the sake of an exploration of the language material. The phonograph and gramophone could now record and reproduce the sounds of a realistic setting exactly, and Apollinaire could thus abandon the task of rendering scenes exactly as they might occur in reality. Timothy Matthew's claim that Apollinaire embarks on some sort of "linguistic photography", by verbally "recording" the surrounding in his *poèmes conversations*, thus misses the point.⁴³ Apollinaire does not at all merely record in an objective, documentary fashion, but consciously chooses and arranges found material. He cuts, pastes, manipulates and thus edits his materials in a way that would become technologically possible only years later with the advent of more advanced sound recording equipment.

⁴¹ Quoted from Roger Little, *Guillaume Apollinaire*, p. 91.

⁴² Quoted from *ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

⁴³ Timothy Matthews, *Reading Apollinaire*, p. 154.

The partly hand-written *calligrammes*, Apollinaire maintains, were a conscious response to the end of the monopoly of the medium of script caused by the proliferation of other storage media:

[Les *calligrammes*] sont une idéalisation de la poésie vers-libriste et une précision typographique à l'époque où la typographie termine brillamment sa carrière, à l'aurore des moyens nouveaux de reproduction que sont le cinéma et le phonographe.⁴⁴

Another parallel between Cubism and Apollinaire's work becomes manifest: remnants of everyday life and ready-made material not only invade the sphere of art, as in the collages of Braque and Picasso, where wallpaper, newspaper-fragments and pieces of rope are inserted, but also permeate into the sphere of poetry. Painters can now paint with whatever they like, Apollinaire states in *Les Peintres Cubists* – with pipes, stamps, postcards, candelabras, pieces of oilcloth etc. In “Lundi Rue Christine”, Apollinaire too deploys “found” material, sequences of ready-made speech, prefabricated material, building blocks from heterogeneous backgrounds which are decontextualised and arranged into a new compositional hierarchy. Greet and Lockerbie maintain that the poem shows that “poetry is potentially present in every manifestation of language, however inconsequential, if form and structure can bring the right quality of attention to bear on it.”⁴⁵ But one must go a step further here: it is the very process of turning everyday language into art itself that is of importance. Only by means of choosing and selecting, by means of cutting and isolating and by means of arranging and structuring it into new compositional hierarchies does everyday language become poetic. As in Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, process and concept are the decisive moments here. In the “Richard Mutt Case”, Duchamp elucidates the crux of his ready-mades: it is not important whether objects are handmade, but what counts is the choice and displacement of certain articles, which undermines their functionality and useful significance and equips them with a new thought.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Quoted from Roger Little, *Guillaume Apollinaire*, p. 36.

⁴⁵ S.I. Lockerbie and Ann Hyde Greet, “Commentary”, p. 378.

⁴⁶ Cf. Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, vol. 2. London: Thames & Hudson, 1997, p. 650.

Moreover, Apollinaire's deployment of pre-fabricated language elements, just like Duchamp's invention of ready-mades, subverts the notion of art as handicraft, as self-made and original. Apollinaire no longer exclusively deploys only original textual sequences, but chooses from the vast array of given everyday life materials. As Scheunemann has pointed out, "'Lundi Rue Christine' is the cornerstone of a paradigmatic change from 'auctor' to 'arrangeur'.'" ⁴⁷

The preoccupation with simultaneity is another concern of both the Cubists and Apollinaire, who writes:

On a donné ici des poèmes où cette simultanéité existait dans *l'esprit* et dans *la lettre même* puisqu'il est impossible de les lire sans concevoir immédiatement la simultanéité de ce qu'ils expriment, poèmes-conversation où le poète au centre de la vie enregistre en quelque sorte le lyrisme ambiant. ⁴⁸

The single perspective, just as in Cubism, is abandoned in "Lundi Rue Christine" as well, which is a decidedly multi-perspectival work marked by a mobile, constantly changing point of view and numerous different voices. "The refusal to accept any position fixed in space, time or self, is carried over into the instabilities of language itself", Ian Revie writes. ⁴⁹ Space is reworked in the multilinear *calligrammes*, and a subversion of the dominant function of sign systems is manifest both in the introduction of letters into images and the introduction of spatial structures in poetry. Butor identifies Apollinaire's poetry as a poetic response to Cubist paintings: "[Les *Calligrammes* sont] une réponse poétique à la prise de possession de la lettre et du mot par la peinture cubiste." ⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Cf. Dietrich Scheunemann: "Die Schriftzeichen der Maler – die Stilleben der Dichter. Grenzverwehungen zwischen den Künsten um 1910". In: Thomas Koebner (ed.), *Laokoon und kein Ende: Der Wettstreit der Künste*. Munich: edition text + kritik, 1989, pp. 85-87.

⁴⁸ Quoted from Willard Bohn, *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry. 1914 – 1928*, p. 64.

Octavio Paz writes about the poem: "Apollinaire's simultanism also borders on irony. In the poem *Lundi rue Christine*, simultanism becomes the conjunction, or, more accurately, confusion of languages. The poem is a tiny box of echoes, in which snatches of conversations heard in a restaurant resonate. A criticism of human beings and of language: what we say and hear at all times is words without meaning." Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire. Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*, pp. 128-129.

⁴⁹ Ian Revie, "Apollinaire and Cubist Innovation: Resetting the Frontiers, Changing the Paradigm". In: *European Avant-Garde. New Perspectives*, p. 89.

⁵⁰ Quoted from Willard Bohn, *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry. 1914 – 1928*, p. 18.

Moreover, “polysemic” forms are used both in Cubist paintings and in Apollinaire’s *poèmes conversations*: lines and shapes often seem to be part of more than one form at once in the faceted Cubist constructs, and some of Apollinaire’s verses are similarly multifunctional: they too can be attributed to more than one semantic constellation.⁵¹ The principle of double syntax is thus another major point of convergence, as is the relative autonomy of individual parts both in the pictures and the poems. Overlapping planes correspond with overlapping conversation, and the analysis of the three-dimensional form is complemented by the analysis of the codes of meaning in language; closed forms are broken up and pierced open in either medium. Additionally, residues of semantic compatibility in “Lundi Rue Christine” can be related to residues of realistic detail scattered in the works of Picasso and Braque.

The most important correspondence, however, is to be found in the shared technique of dissection.⁵² Space, shapes and objects are taken apart and analysed, as are linguistic structures, which are similarly pierced open and fragmented. The implications of the dismemberment and analysis both of depicted objects and spatial conventions in painting and of linguistic rules and structures are equally radical. Not only is the concept of stable referents and fixed viewpoints radically undermined by the abandonment of illusionism, semantic compatibility and unambiguous relations among textual parts, but the material itself, the graphic as well as the linguistic signs, are uncovered as signs, and thus as artificial conventions. It is the violation of a set of rules which draws attention to the initial presence of conventions in the first place. As Jonathan Culler has stated, this is in fact one of the chief merits of avant-garde art in general:

⁵¹ Pepe Karmel discusses this phenomenon explicitly: “The ‘polysemy’ of Picasso’s forms (as Yve-Alain Bois has dubbed it) does not seem to have attracted critical attention at the time. It was only a decade later, writing about Juan Gris rather than Picasso, that the critic Maurice Raynal took note of the role in Cubism of what he called ‘plastic metaphor’ – that is, the use of the same form to represent two different motifs. The same back-and-forth curve may be used to represent both the side of a guitar and the contour of a range of hills; parallel lines may indicate both the strings of a guitar and the staff of a page of sheet music.” Pepe Karmel, *Picasso and the Invention of Cubism*, pp. 18-19.

⁵² Lockerbie too maintains that “Apollinaire was encouraged in his thinking by the similar fragmentation of structure he observed in Cubist painting, particularly in the work of Picasso.” S. I. Lockerbie, “Introduction”, pp. 3-4.

If the meaning of avant-garde literature lies in its challenge to our habitual ways of making sense (identifying narrative sequences, recognizable characters, and so on) then the project of interpreting these challenging words requires one to make explicit the conventions and the interpretive procedures on which literary intelligibility generally relies. Thus, it is precisely the works that brazenly flout codes and conventions that direct us to the importance of understanding those conventions.⁵³

However, one must go even further here: the violation of hitherto unnoticed, because unchallenged, conventions not only draws them to our attention, but puts into question their very legitimacy. Apollinaire, without giving up the shape of conventional words or even sentences, nevertheless subverts their functions as stable referents with fixed semantic properties. By means of purposefully violating and transgressing codes of language usage, he is thus among the first to embark on a journey into the very heart of language and communication.

⁵³ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*. London; New York: Routledge, 2002, p. XIV.

2. MAN AND MACHINE: MARINETTI'S SYNTACTICAL REVOLUTION

2.1 The Technological Modifiers of Modern Sensibility

The numerous manifestos of the Italian Futurists touch upon almost all key elements of avant-garde aesthetics in general. Above all, they are concerned with language dissection and a thorough linguistic reform aiming at a revitalisation of language, evident in the abandonment of syntactic structures in favour of free-word arrangements, as well as in the use of expressive typography, free orthography and the introduction of multilinearity. They propagate intermediality, the tearing down of boundaries between the arts – heedlessly mixing pictorial and linguistic signs together – and introduce the notions of dynamism, simultaneity and speed into both painting and literature. From the very inauguration of the movement in 1909, the Futurists pursued not only aesthetic aims, but also intended to actively intervene into the socio-political sphere of Italy, publishing various political manifestos and agendas. Furthermore, they explicitly understood and designated their art as a conscious reaction to the radical changes in science and technology which so drastically altered the everyday sphere of life and individual modes of perception. Not only did they address the accelerated pace of urban life, and the altered sensibility which results from it thematically in various theoretical writings, but they reflected the changes stylistically and on the level of the signifier as well. Technology substantially inspired their very methods of writing, notably in their aspiration to speed up communication and to achieve telegraphic brevity and precision.

Technological inventions are explicitly designated as the main stimuli and triggers for their formal innovations. The “fetish-objects of the new sensibility”, as John J. White calls them, are glorified and celebrated, named as muses, inspirations and aesthetic models, and perceived as the ultimate agents for artistic change.¹ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the founder and main theorist of the group, postulates – in anticipation of more recent media studies related findings, which examine the ways in which media affect strategies of cognition and perception – that new modes of

¹ Cf. John J. White, *Literary Futurism. Aspects of the first avant garde*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

communication and transportation shape and influence the very constituency of the modern psyche. Man is “educated by the machine,” Marinetti proclaims.² “Futurism is grounded in the complete renewal of human sensibility brought about by the great discoveries of science”:

Those people who today make use of the telegraph, the telephone, the phonograph, the train, the bicycle, the motorcycle, the automobile, the ocean liner, the dirigible, the aeroplane, the cinema, the great newspaper (synthesis of a day in the world’s life) do not realize that these various means of communication, transportation and information have a decisive influence on their psyches.³

The listed innovations are “important modifiers of [the modern] sensibility”, for they caused a number of significant phenomena, which Marinetti identifies as a general acceleration of life, “multiple and simultaneous awareness in single individuals” and a dread of slowness, verbosity and detailed explanations, which should be abandoned in favour of radically reduced, concise and abbreviated statements.⁴ A new beauty is proclaimed: “the beauty of speed.” Famously, Marinetti declares that “a racing car [...] is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*.”⁵ Perception is altered by a new empirically observable dynamism, and, Marinetti feels, old modes of communication can not keep pace, are no longer compatible and become insufficient for the expression of the new phenomena.

“[T]he triumphant progress of science makes profound changes in humanity inevitable”, the Futurists proclaim, and both traditional pictorial and verbal means of expression have to be abandoned and replaced by radically renewed strategies and techniques as a consequence.⁶ Lyricism too has to be speeded up, mirroring a generally more dynamic, efficient and faster fervour, and “the habit of visual foreshortening and visual synthesis caused by the speed of trains and cars [...]”⁷

² F. T. Marinetti, “Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine” In: F. T. Marinetti, *Selected Writings*. Edited by R.W. Flint. London: Secker & Warburg, 1971, p. 91.

³ F.T.Marinetti, “Destruction of Syntax – Imagination without Strings – Words-in Freedom 1913”. In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 96.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ F.T. Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909”. In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 21.

⁶ Quoted from Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment*, p. 92.

⁷ F.T.Marinetti, “Destruction of Syntax – Imagination without Strings – Words-in Freedom 1913”, p. 97.

2.1.1 The Telegraphic Paradigm

As early as 1913, Marinetti identifies a “new tourist sensibility bred by ocean liners”, a new sense of an interconnected world.⁸ He declares “[t]he earth shrunk by speed”, and maintains that the modern subject is now distinguished by an awareness of what is happening around the whole world, which results in a “vast increase of a sense of humanity and a momentary urgent need to establish relations with all mankind.”⁹ This new impression of global interconnectedness is triggered by one invention above all: the telegraph. Mankind is now able to communicate “without strings”; detached from the confines of space, messages can now travel freely and swiftly, even into remote areas of the globe.

Apollinaire, the futurist, the expressionist and the cubo-futurist poets alike all discuss the impact of the invention of telegraphy and later radio upon their works, and are preoccupied with “telegraphic lyricism”, a phenomenon that emerged in various avant-garde movements all over the globe at roughly the same time, as White has pointed out.¹⁰ “The telegraphic dissemination of the new word of science became the technological equivalent of the spreading of the Gospel”, White argues, and various writers, he maintains, consequently treated the subject “with an appropriate religiosity, often using the imagery of the biblical word.”¹¹ They are unified by a common concern with the reduction of the language material, the abandonment of narrative, anecdote and episode and a quest for brevity and poetic economy.

Marinetti elaborates this issue most explicitly in the manifesto “Destruction of Syntax – Imagination without Strings – Words-in-Freedom”. After having described the diverse technological modifiers of the new sensibility and the phenomena that they cause, Marinetti calls for “urgent laconism” and “essential brevity”, for “love of speed, abbreviation and summary”. “Quick, give me the whole thing in two words!”

⁸ F.T. Marinetti, “Destruction of Syntax – Imagination without Strings – Words-in Freedom 1913”, p. 97.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ In 1899, Guglielmo Marconi sent the first radio signal across the English Channel, in 1901, he transmitted it across the Atlantic. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for physics in recognition of his achievements in wireless telegraphy in 1909, which proved both the importance and the popular acknowledgement of his discoveries. Cf. John J. White, *Literary Futurism*, p. 148.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 148.

he cries.¹² An animated person in an extreme situation, Marinetti maintains, will instinctively destroy syntax, and assault his or her interlocutor with fistfuls of unordered essential words – all uttered with the speed and economy of the telegraph:

In this way he will reveal the analogical foundation of life, telegraphically, with the same economical speed that the telegraph imposes on reporters and war correspondents in their swift reportings.¹³

In Marinetti's poetics, the machine and technology are not only celebrated on the content level, but permeate the very substance of language: the Futurists aspire in their writings to conceptual and structural analogies to machine-associated qualities like precision, effectiveness and telegraphic brevity. Technology is thus not only theme and inspiration, but to a certain degree also aesthetic model for futurist poetry.¹⁴ Marinetti explicitly calls for "the enthusiastic imitation of electricity and the machine":

Nothing is more beautiful than a great humming central electric station that holds the hydraulic pressure of a mountain chain and the electric power of a vast horizon, synthesized in marble distribution panels bristling with dials, keyboards, and shining commutators. These panels are our only models for the writing of poetry.¹⁵

"Imagination without strings", or wireless imagination, a term coined in direct analogy to wireless communication, is itself a metaphor for the telegraphic style. Marinetti defines it as follows:

By the imagination without strings I mean the absolute freedom of images or analogies, expressed with unhampered words and with no connecting strings of syntax and with no punctuation.¹⁶

¹² F.T. Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax – Imagination without Strings – Words-in Freedom 1913", p. 98.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Cf. John J. White, *Literary Futurism*, p. 357.

¹⁵ F.T. Marinetti, "Geometric and Mechanical Splendour and the Numerical Sensibility 1914". In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 155.

¹⁶ F.T. Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax – Imagination without Strings – Words-in Freedom 1913", p. 99.

Grammar and syntactical laws are equated with “wires” that artificially channel and restrict the flow of lyrical emotion. They are to be broken down and substituted with immediate and bold analogies, the “deep love that assembles distant, seemingly diverse and hostile things” – a definition which reverberates the principles of collage.¹⁷ Condensed metaphors, telegraphic images, nodes of thought and compressed analogies are to bring the Futurists to the “essence of the material”.

However, in spite of the Futurists’ glorification of machines and technological progress, there seems to be a tension between the celebration of technology on the one hand, and a rather traditional notion of art as essentially handmade on the other hand. The Futurists tend not to integrate technologically produced material into their works, as the Cubists, Duchamp or the Dadaists did, for instance in Picasso’s “Still life with a chair caning” or Duchamp’s “Bicycle Wheel”. The latter embrace technology on yet a different level by including it into or even declaring it as the actual work of art, thus radically challenging traditional notions of art as handicraft and self-made. The Futurists’ aesthetics in contrast are very much old-fashioned *Genieästhetiken*: in fact, as Giacomo Balla points out, the work of art is to be one that “no machine can imitate, art that only the artistic Creative Genius can conceive”, and they reject “with scorn” even the slightest connection to photography.¹⁸

2.1.2 Dynamism and Photography

One of the most prominent new features introduced both to painting and poetry by the Futurists is the concept of dynamism. Again, the proximity of quests in fine arts and literature is remarkable: the poets’ attempts to depict dynamism and movement

¹⁷ Ibid. Cf. Marjorie Perloff, who also points out the similarities between the concept of “bold analogies” and collage. Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment*, pp. 56-58.

¹⁸ Giacomo Balla, “The Late Balla – Futurist Balla 1915”. In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 206. Technology is actively embraced and incorporated into artistic productions only by the musician Luigi Russolo, who created machines with the function of introducing the “art of noises” into the repertoire of Futurist music and performance. These *intonarumori*, or noise-intoners, produced noises specifically associated with machines, and, moreover, were little machines themselves, “rectangular wooden boxes with funnel-shaped acoustical amplifiers, or megaphones, projecting from the front”, as Michael Kirby describes them. Michael Kirby, *Futurist Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1971, p. 37. Kirby elaborates further: “These boxes, averaging about two-to-three feet in height, and the megaphones varied in size, but the general appearance was the same. They were played by means of a protruding handle that moved in a slot on the top or side of the instrument [...] Although the quality of the sound remained constant, its pitch was variable. Just as the pitch of an electric motor changes as its rotors spin faster or slower, each noise-intoner had to create a variable sound.” Ibid. Russolo must certainly be considered as a pioneer of technologically supported sound experiments.

typographically are analogous to the experiments of the Futurist painters, who aspired to render “dynamic sensation itself” pictorially. The painters famously maintain that “indeed, all things move, all things run, all things are rapidly changing.”¹⁹ Moving objects constantly multiply themselves, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà and Luigi Russolo declare, “thus, a running horse has not four legs, but twenty.”²⁰ Boccioni proclaims:

With dynamism, then, art climbs to an ideal, superior plane, creating a style and expressing our own age of speed and of simultaneity. [...] Hence dynamism is a general law of simultaneity and interpenetration dominating everything, in movement, that is appearance/exception/shading.²¹

In poetry, the concern is also with depicting motion. “To render the successive motions of an object, one must render the chain of analogies that it evokes, each condensed and concentrated into one essential word”, Marinetti writes.²² However, the futurist celebration of dynamism is also ideologically tinged, indicating the notion of a unsympathetically forward-moving society, the uncompromising glorification of technological progress and scorn for any forms of stagnation.²³

Technology is thus triggering formal innovations on two levels. Firstly, it demands a new artistic vocabulary and new aesthetic strategies for the depiction of the phenomena it causes. Dynamism as well as movement and speed are indeed *the* new features in modern life, and their artistic capture constitutes a new challenge. Ardengo Soffici declares: “There is a profound and intimate difference in the poetic stimulus; and therefore there must be a difference in the expressive plastic texture.”²⁴ Secondly, technology is seen as a liberator freeing the painters’ hands from exact imitation: photography has perfected the task of mimesis to a degree that painters can

¹⁹ Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla and Gino Severini, “Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto 1910”. In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 27.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

²¹ Umberto Boccioni, “Plastic Dynamism 1913”. In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 94.

²² F.T. Marinetti, “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature 1912”. In: *Selected Writings*, p. 86.

²³ Perloff too draws attention to the convergence of the notion of aesthetic dynamism and economic and political developments: “Both the Italian and the Russian versions of Futurism found their roots in economically backward countries that were experiencing rapid industrialization – the faith in dynamism and national expansion associated with capitalism in its early phase. In the prewar years, political and aesthetic decisions seemed, for however brief a time, to be, so to speak, in synch – hence, no doubt, the extraordinarily rich artistic production.” Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment*, p. 36.

²⁴ Ardengo Soffici, “The Subject in Futurist Painting 1914”. In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 135.

never accomplish, and they are consequently released to develop from being “pitiable imitator[s] of static and exterior forms” to becoming creators of conceptual worlds. Anton Giulio Bragaglia states that:

[...] our aim is to make a determined move away from reality, since cinematography, photography and chronophotography already exist to deal with mechanically precise and cold reproduction. We seek the interior essence of things: pure movement [...].²⁵

Balla calls for the abandonment of static traditional painting and the exploration of the unique qualities of the medium in a determined effort to find a new task for painters after photography has taken over and perfected realist imitation:

With the perfection of photography, static traditional painting has completely fallen from repute; photography kills static contemplation. [...] It is imperative therefore not to halt and contemplate the corpse of tradition, but to renew ourselves by creating an art that no machine can imitate, that only the artistic Creative Genius can conceive.²⁶

Accurate reproduction of reality is vehemently rejected by the Futurists: “We despise the precise, mechanical, glacial reproduction of reality, and take the utmost care to avoid it”, Boccioni writes.²⁷ And:

We have always rejected with disgust and scorn even a distant relationship with photography, because it is outside art. Photography is valuable in one respect: it reproduces and imitates objectively, and, having perfected this, it has freed the artist from the obligation of reproducing reality exactly.²⁸

2.2 Intermediality and the Anticipation of Letters in Movement

The Futurists were not only concerned with literature and painting, but were preoccupied with all arts: architecture, sculpture, music, theatre, performance and cinema. Their concern was a decidedly interdisciplinary one. Moreover, they tried to transgress and overcome the traditional boundaries between the arts and fuse them together, thus anticipating the notion of “intermediality” as promoted later by the

²⁵ Anton Giulio Bragaglia, “Futurist Photodynamism 1911”. In: *Futurist Manifestos*, pp. 43-44.

²⁶ Giacomo Balla, “The Late Balla – Futurist Balla 1915”. In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 206.

²⁷ Anton Giulio Bragaglia, “Futurist Photodynamism 1911”, p. 39.

²⁸ Umberto Boccioni, “Futurist Dynamism and French Painting 1913”. In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 110.

Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, who defines “intermedia” as “works which fall conceptually between media that are already known.”²⁹ “When two or more discrete media are conceptually fused, they become intermedia”, Higgins writes. “They differ from mixed media in being inseparable in the essence of an artwork.”³⁰ Bruno Corradini and Emilio Settimelli promote a strikingly similar notion, calling for a reckless fusion of “all the arts already in existence”. “There is no reason why every activity must of necessity be confined to one or other of those ridiculous limitations which we call music, literature, painting etc”, they write.³¹ They continue:

Therefore every artist will be able to invent a new form of art, which would be the free expression of the particular idiosyncrasies of his cerebral make-up, with its modern madness and complication, and which would be found mixed in accordance with a new measure and scale, the most diverse means of expression – words, colours, notes, indications of shape, of scent, of facts, noises, movements and of physical sensations; i.e. the chaotic, unaesthetic and heedless mixing of all the arts already in existence and of all those which are and will be created by the inexhaustible will for renewal which Futurism will be able to infuse into mankind.³²

Artists should scoop freely from all artistic wells at the same time, mixing signs from disparate sign systems and backgrounds together in the constant search for new means of expression. Not only the restrictions of syntax, but also the restrictions of genre are to be broken open. This premise seems to have been put into effect most notably in Marinetti’s *Tavola parolibera*, his free-word posters, which are indeed hybrids between fine art and literature, between posters, collages, flyers and poems, in which he makes use of pictorial and of linguistic signs at the same time.

One example is “montagne + vallate + strade x joffre”, which was distributed as a broadsheet in Milan in 1915. For the publication in the volume *Les Mots en liberté futuristes*, the poem was renamed into “Après la Marne, Joffre visita le front en

²⁹ Dick Higgins, *Horizons. The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984, p. 23.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 137-139. Mixed Media in contrast are defined as “the presence in a work of two or more discrete media without their being conceptually fused. An example is the opera, in which there are music, visual art, and a literary text, but one always knows which is which. In this way mixed media differ from intermedia and intermedial forms such as the happening.”

³¹ Bruno Corradini and Emilio Settimelli, “Weights, measures and Prices of Artistic Genius – Futurist Manifesto 1914”. In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 146.

³² Ibid.

auto”, which specifies the poem’s spatial and temporal setting.³³ As indicated by the title and the phrase “verbalisation dynamique de la route”, “montagne + vallate + strade x joffre”, which White describes as a collage poem, depicts the journey of French General Joseph Joffre through a valley to the front, where he gave a speech to his troops, celebrating the victory against the German offensive at the Marne in September 1914.³⁴ Fragmented phrases like “Vive la France”, “Mort aux Boches” and “Mon AMliiii”, presumably from Joffre’s speech or the soldiers he addresses or passes by on his way, are set against the background of onomatopoeic war sounds, oversized letters, as well as mathematical symbols and numbers, which seem to represent the troops.³⁵



F. T. Marinetti, “montagne + vallate + strade x joffre”, 1915

³³ The collage refers to the decisive First World War Battle of the Marne (September 6-12 1914), where the French troops under General Joseph Joffre, commander in chief of the French forces from 1914-1916, supported by their British allies, celebrated a strategic triumph over the Germans, by defying a major German offensive, regaining lost territory and crushing the hopes of the Germans to end the war at the Western front as swiftly as possible.

³⁴ White writes: “A far better-known collage, Marinetti’s *montagne + vallate + strade x joffre* (also 1915), consists, by contrast, almost entirely of collaged and printed words, with the addition of a number of large letters to give the rudimentary shape of a setting.” John J. White, *Literary Futurism*, p. 124.

³⁵ Cf. László Moholy-Nagy, who states: “The general’s conventional speech to the soldiers is translated into typography. His words are torn to pieces by the accompanying noise of machine gun and cannons. A large number of soldiers is represented by the logarithm column in the upper left, they echo the general’s shouting ‘Vive la France!’ ‘Mort aux Boches!’.” Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 127.

The defeated Prussians are represented by the numbers in the lower left hand corner, “depicted here as decimated by gunfire to the point where their numbers are the square-root of what they had been at the outset”, as White maintains.³⁶ The block of mainly onomatopoeic words and symbols in the right hand corner is bracketed and summarised as “verbalisation dynamique de la route”.

On the level of content, this collage amounts to little more than a propagandistic celebration of an ally who successfully defeated the common enemy at the Battle of the Marne. Formally, however, the poem is more innovative and presents a vivid illustration of intermedial principles: letters here function both as linguistic and as visual elements. In contrast to most of Apollinaire’s *calligrammes*, they are not arranged in the shape of objects, but take over the task of pictorial signs themselves and thus transgress their usual function, programmatically violating established codes of representation. The two shapely “S”s at the left might suggest the curvy street through the mountains, as Moholy-Nagy has suggested, or the river Marne itself, where the battle took place. The three dominant “M”s might indicate the pointy shapes of mountain ridges, as well as alluding to the name of the battle. At the same time, they are the first letters of the exclamations “Mon AMIiiii” and “MaAAAAAa petite”, thus fulfilling a linguistic and a pictorial mission at the same time in a truly intermedial manner.

Intermedial works touch upon the very essence of the respective media and genres by radically transgressing established boundaries and by violating the expectations of the recipients, whose habitual reception strategies are frustrated. The Futurists seem to have anticipated and explored many issues which were to be crucial for their successors as well, both in the orbit of the neo-avant-garde and in contemporary digital poetry: apart from intermediality, other constantly recurring concerns are interactivity, dynamism and the theme of movement.

The Futurists famously broke down not only the separating boundaries between the arts, but also those between audience and performers. They integrated the viewers into their spectacles and forced them to play an active part in their *serate*, or Futurist evenings. Marinetti declares:

³⁶ Ibid.

The Variety Theatre is alone in seeking the audience's collaboration. It doesn't remain static like a stupid voyeur, but joins noisily in the action, in the singing, accompanying the orchestra, communicating with the actors in surprising actions and bizarre dialogues. [...] And because the audience co-operates in this way with the actors' fantasy, the action develops simultaneously on the stage, in the boxes, and in the orchestra.³⁷

In 1913 already, the Futurists announced the death of book culture, which in their view was too static, too weak to keep up with and transmit the new dynamism of life.³⁸ Marinetti states:

The book, a wholly passéist means of preserving and communicating thought, has for a long time been fated to disappear like cathedrals, towers, crenellated walls, museums, and the pacifist ideal. The book, static companion of the sedentary, the nostalgic, the neutralist, cannot entertain or exalt the new Futurist generations intoxicated with revolutionary and bellicose dynamism.³⁹

Not surprisingly, the Futurists demand that the cinema, the technologically most advanced medium of their age, should take over from the book. By this they mean futurist cinema, at least in theory, since only one futurist movie was ever made, which is now lost. Cinema was to contribute to the general renewal of the modern sensibility, "taking the place of the literary review (always pedantic) and the drama (always predictable), and killing the book (always tedious and oppressive)."⁴⁰ In the manifesto "Futurist Cinema", it is celebrated as the ultimate fusion of all art forms:

³⁷ F.T. Marinetti, "The Variety Theatre 1913". In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 127.

³⁸ This prophesy of doom was to reappear with new force in the orbit of hypertext poetry in the early 1990s, when it was predicted that the book was finally being surpassed by the advent of new media that opened up radically new ways of organising the signifying material.

³⁹ F.T. Marinetti, Bruno Corra, Emilio Settemielli, Arnaldo Ginna, Giacomo Balla and Remo Chiti, "The Futurist Cinema 1916". In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 207

⁴⁰ Ibid. The only known Futurist movie was called "Futurist Life" and shot in 1916, a co-production of Balla, Settemielli, Corra, Marinetti and Ginna. Judy Rawson writes: "The film was a series of sequences, some of them dealing with Futurist social and psychological problems. The first showed some dynamic young Futurists led by Marinetti attacking an old man at a restaurant in Piazzale Michelangelo because he was drinking his soup in an old-fashioned way. There was also – recalling the title of Marinetti's manifesto – the 'Dance of Geometric Splendour,' with strong beams of light projected on to girls dressed only in tin foil, so that 'the flashes of light criss-crossed and destroyed the weight of their bodies.' The film ended with an inquiry into 'Why Franz Josef did not die,' which the censors cut. As it was, the film aroused a great deal of emotion, and objects were hurled at the screen at every showing. Of the few copies made, all are now lost." Judy Rawson, "Italian Futurism". In: Richard Kostelanetz (ed.), *The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature*. Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1982, pp. 148-149.

“Painting + sculpture + plastic dynamism + words-in-freedom + composed noises [intonarumori] + architecture + synthetic theatre = Futurist cinema.”⁴¹

As early as 1916, the Futurists envisioned words in movement, animated letters and typographical dramas equipped with a soundtrack:

Filmed Words-In-Freedom in Movement (synoptic tables of lyric values – dramas of humanized or animated letters – orthographic dramas – typographical dramas – geometric dramas – numeric sensibility, etc.).⁴²

These ideas would indeed be realised and put into effect, with the help of new technologies – about eighty years later.

2.3 Futurist Politics: The Socio-Political Impetus

From the very beginning, the Futurists wanted to influence and revolutionise not only art and literature, but other spheres of life as well, which is manifest in their “desire to penetrate all aspects of life”, as Umbro Apollonio has put it.⁴³ They wrote various manifestos on subjects such as clothing, cooking, sex, and above all, politics. From the very inauguration of the movement, they published political manifestos with concrete and, in contrast to many of the Dadaists’ politically tinged manifestos, potentially realisable goals. In the “Futurist Political Programme” of 1913 for instance, they advocated aggressive nationalism, war as cultural hygiene, colonial expansionist politics, patriotic education with an emphasis on physical rather than intellectual edification, irredentism, anti-clericalism, anti-socialism, cult of progress and speed, and the modernisation of agriculture and industry.⁴⁴ Moreover, Marinetti considered the Futurists to be the intellectual engineers of Italy’s entry into the war:

The Futurist movement first exercised an artistic effect while at the same time indirectly influencing Italian politics through its propaganda of revolutionary, anticlerical patriotism that was directed against the Triple Alliance and that prepared us for our war against Austria. Italian Futurism,

⁴¹ F.T. Marinetti, Bruno Corra, Emilio Settimielli, Arnaldo Ginna, Giacomo Balla and Remo Chiti, “The Futurist Cinema 1916”, p. 218.

⁴² Ibid. The Argentinian digital poet Ana Maria Uribe for instance re-works a Futurist poem – “treno in corsi” – and equips it with literal movement and a soundtrack. Cf. Ana Maria Uribe, “Tren en marcha”. At: <http://www.vispo.com/uribe/train.html>.

⁴³ Umbro Apollonio, “Introduction”. In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 13.

⁴⁴ “Irredentism”, according to the OED, is the advocacy of the restoration to a country of any territory formerly belonging to it, and, more specifically, in 19th century Italian politics it denoted the return to Italy of all Italian-speaking districts subject to other countries.

prophet and architect of our war, disseminator and coach of courage and freedom, opened its first artistic meeting at the Lirico Theater in Milan eleven years ago with the cry *Down with Austria!*⁴⁵

Marinetti launched a "Futurist Political Party" in 1918, and ran for the parliamentary elections a year later, though without success.⁴⁶ At a later stage, the Futurists joined forces with Benito Mussolini and helped him seize power in 1922. Marinetti considered Futurism as intellectual and artistic precursor of the Fascist movement, a claim which he puts forth in the volume *Futurism and Fascism* of 1924. The book is dedicated to Mussolini, and represents one of the key texts to portray Mussolini's fascism as a consequent continuation and in fact realisation of the political demands of the Futurists.⁴⁷ Hansgeorg Schmidt-Bergman even argues that the Futurists did not "fail" in the Bürgerian sense, that is in failing to accomplish concrete political and social changes, because Italian Fascism can to a certain degree be considered as a political realisation of futurist demands:

Die Futuristen, so kann man zugespitzt sagen, sind als Avantgarde auch nicht gescheitert wie der politische Dadaismus oder der Surrealismus, sie konnten den Faschismus durchaus als die politische Realisierung ihres 'Minimalprogramms', wie Marinetti es formuliert hat, begreifen.⁴⁸

Here, a tenet of Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde* seems to apply: one can indeed designate many of the Futurists' manifestations as an attempt to restructure life from

⁴⁵ F.T. Marinetti, "Words in Freedom". In: F.T. Marinetti, *Selected Poems and Related Prose*. Selected by Luce Marinetti. New Haven; London: 2002, p. 85.

⁴⁶ The main objectives of the "Futurist Political Party" were similar to those stated in the manifesto of 1913: they called for a modernisation of the economy and a radical reform of the political culture of Italy, as well as an enlargement of the army and navy, aggressive foreign policy, colonialism, irredentism, pan-Italianism, anti-socialism, anti-clericalism, and economic liberalism. Cf. Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics. Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*. Providence; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996, p. 70.

In the manifesto "Futurist Democracy – Political Dynamism" of 1919, however, Marinetti clearly differentiates Futurism as an avant-garde movement from Futurism as a political party: while the artistic movement is by nature elitist, always ahead of the slower sensitivity of the people and thus misunderstood, hated and constantly under attack, he argues, the party intuitively fathoms the acute needs and desires of the masses and speaks in a language they understand.

⁴⁷ Cf. Hansgeorg Schmidt-Bergmann, *Futurismus. Geschichte, Ästhetik, Dokumente*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1993, p.153.

Marinetti's services to the Fascist cause were acknowledged and rewarded in 1929, when he, together with Gabriele D'Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello und Ardengo Soffici, was made a member of the Italian Academy. He subsequently served as a faithful cultural ambassador to the regime until his death in 1944.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

the basis of art, as “Versuch, von der Kunst aus eine neue Lebenspraxis zu organisieren.”⁴⁹ Günter Berghaus maintains as well that:

Futurist art was inextricably linked with a radical transformation of the political and social spheres. [...] Life was to be changed through art [...]. The Futurist project of innovation encompassed all aspects of human existence, and was conceived as a total and permanent revolution. What was later called ‘Futurist reconstruction of the Universe’ was aimed at a transformation of mankind in all its physiological and psychological aspects, of the social and political conditions in the modern metropolis.⁵⁰



F.T. Marinetti, “Irredentismo”, 1914

Art in the futurist context is frequently used as a deliberate social strategy, as a tool, often as a vehicle for concrete political beliefs. “Irredentismo”, a collage by Marinetti from 1914, features political catch phrases cut from newspapers, such as “avanzata”, which means “to move forward” or also “advanced”, “ripigliare”, “to take again” or “to take back”, and “Mazzini”, a reference to Giuseppe Mazzini, a prominent political figure in the Italian struggle for independence. These words are set against the background of a crudely drawn map of Italy and adjoining regions and dynamic

⁴⁹ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, p. 67.

⁵⁰ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, p. 47.

black arrows indicating the territories which Italy should regain and occupy, poignantly illustrating the double function of futurist works.

The theatre too, as Marinetti suggests, is to be appropriated as a platform for anti-neutralist and irredentist propaganda, because it is significantly more effective than literature due to its much wider appeal and more immediate impact:

As we await our much prayed-for great war, we Futurists carry our violent antineutralist action from city square to university and back again, using our art to prepare the Italian sensibility for the great hour of maximum danger. [...] Therefore we think that the only way to inspire Italy with the warlike spirit today is through the theatre. In fact ninety percent of Italians go to the theatre, whereas only ten percent read books and reviews.⁵¹

As Berghaus has pointed out, futurist theatre was inextricably intertwined with political actionism: "Futurist politics were performative, just as Futurist performances were political."⁵²

The issue that sets Marinetti apart from many other avant-garde poets most decidedly is the fact that he propagates very concrete and realisable goals on the content level. Most of Marinetti's *parole in libertà* poems amount to little more than celebrations of war and Italian bravery and abuses of the enemies. While in most other avant-garde movements, content is destabilised, signifiers and their signifieds are put into play, and the rug of certainty is strategically pulled from underneath the readers' feet, Marinetti transmits concrete and tangible subject matter. Mostly, meaning is not blurred and ambiguous, but, on the contrary, language is rendered even more expressive. The semantic dimension of language is not neglected in favour of the material qualities of the signifieds, but it is enhanced and fortified by the material and physically perceptible dimensions of signs. Radical formal innovation clashes crassly with one-dimensional content, there is a huge discrepancy between form and meaning: innovative techniques of language dissection are frequently used to transport simple tendentious messages about the beauty of war and technological progress, the abhorrence of Austria and the Prussians and the grandeur and glory of Italy. As White has rightly pointed out, the Futurists' primitivism, again unlike that

⁵¹ F.T. Marinetti, Emilio Settimelli and Bruno Corra, "The Futurist Synthetic Theatre 1915". In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 183.

⁵² Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, p. 73.

of all other avant-garde movements, can often be found on the thematic level.⁵³ It is manifest in their fascism, jingoism, misogyny, celebration of war, and in their odes to violence, rape and cruelty.

2.4 “Zang Tumb Tumb”: *Parole in Libertà* and Imagination without Strings

The Futurists distributed their ideas and works mainly in an independent network of dissemination, established and financed by Marinetti, who, due to a vast inheritance, could afford the publication of numerous books, manifestos, literary magazines, bulletins and flyers. His literary journal *Poesia*, founded in 1905 in Milan, became the most important vehicle of the movement, a fact of which Marinetti was well aware, calling it the “motor of Futurism” and declaring that the foundation of *Poesia* was also “the birth of Futurism”.⁵⁴ In 1907, *Poesia* was expanded into a prolific publishing house: the “Edizioni Futuriste di ‘Poesia’”, which produced more than fifty volumes of futurist writings between 1910 and 1920 alone.⁵⁵ Due to Marinetti’s public relations talent, for which Duchamp called him the “manager” of Futurism, and his contacts to the protagonists of the French avant-garde in Paris, the first futurist manifesto famously appeared on the front page of *Le Figaro* on 20 February 1909, which guaranteed a broad spread of futurist ideas and immediate and wide-ranging public attention.⁵⁶

Above all, in literature as in painting, the Futurists’ concern was with a revitalisation of the artistic register. Marinetti wanted to render language more expressive and capable of keeping up with and evoking the new phenomena dynamism and simultaneity. He put to work the visual and the acoustic qualities of language to

⁵³ John J. White, *Literary Futurism*, pp. 296 ff.

⁵⁴ Quoted from Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, p. 23.

⁵⁵ Additionally, a large number of pamphlets, leaflets and catalogues were produced by Marinetti’s adherents in other Italian cities.

⁵⁶ Similarly important for the dissemination of Futurist tenets and works were the Italian periodicals *Lacerba*, founded by Giovanni Papini and Ardengo Soffici in January 1913, which published various poems, collages and manifestos, and Prezolini’s *La Voce*. Zbigniew Folejewski maintains that “it was probably one of the greatest victories of Futurism when the periodical *Lacerba* [...] publicly acknowledged the importance of Futurism as a genuine artistic program and opened its pages to the futurist writers. *Lacerba* gained an important position in Italian letters. Its surprisingly large circulation (25,000) contributed greatly to the spreading of futurist ideas.” Zbigniew Folejewski, *Futurism and its Place in the Development of Modern Poetry. A Comparative Study and Anthology*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1980, p. 18.

enhance and strengthen its signifying force.⁵⁷ Principally, he did so by dissecting language on the level of syntax, by means of abandoning syntactic hierarchies and certain parts of speech and by privileging others, as well as by the deployment of expressive typography. Concerning typography, Marinetti writes:

I initiate a typographical revolution [...] aimed at the so-called typographical harmony of the page, which is contrary to the flux and reflux, the leaps and bursts of style that run through the page. [...] With this typographical revolution and this multicoloured variety in the letters I mean to redouble the expressive force of words.⁵⁸

The innovative layouts, the deployment of different typefaces, fonts, sizes and degrees of boldness are amongst the Futurists' most valuable contribution to the aesthetics of ensuing avant-garde movements. Moreover, as Perloff has pointed out, the Futurists' typographical revolution can also be considered as an attempt to integrate and respond to the language of advertising, which became more and more observable and permeated public spaces in the shape of posters, advertisement pillars, leaflets, magazines, newspapers and handbills, which were characterised by the use of shrill colours, juxtapositions, bold typefaces, a concoction of fonts as well as exclamation marks and other means of accentuation.⁵⁹

Parole in libertà, Marinetti alleges, were born in the trenches of Tripoli and Adrianople during battle.⁶⁰ A highly agitated person in an "intense zone of life", such as war, Marinetti claims, will instinctively impose radical changes upon language when trying to communicate his or her experience: the person will brutally destroy syntax, waste no time with punctuation, the building of proper sentences and the

⁵⁷ Marinetti also wanted to render expressive elements characteristic of oral speech, paralinguistic signs like mimicry and gesticulation, typographically: "Free expressive orthography and typography also serve to express the facial mimicry and the gesticulation of the narrator. Thus the words-in-freedom manage to make use of (rendering it completely) that part of communicative exuberance and epidermic geniality that is one of the characteristics of the southern races. This energy of accent, voice, and mimicry that has shown up hitherto only in moving tenors and brilliant talkers finds its natural expression in the disproportions of typographic characters that reproduce the facial grimaces and the chiselling, sculptural force of gestures. In this way words-in-freedom become the lyric and transfigured prolongation of our animal magnetism." F.T. Marinetti, "Geometric and Mechanical Splendour and the Numerical Sensibility 1914". In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 157.

⁵⁸ F.T. Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax – Imagination without Strings – Words-in Freedom 1913", p. 104.

⁵⁹ Cf. Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment*, p. 95.

⁶⁰ Cf. F.T. Marinetti, "From the Café Bulgaria in Sofia to the Courage of the Italians in the Balkans and the Military Spirit of Désarrois". In: *Selected Writings*, p. 332.

search for adjectives, and will assault the recipient with fistfuls of unordered essential “free” words, devoid of any connecting strings, as well as concentrated visual, auditory and olfactory sensations.

A different foundation myth of words-in-freedom is presented in the “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature”. Here, Marinetti claims that, while sitting in an airplane and seeing the world beneath him from a bird’s-eye perspective, he became aware of the “ridiculous inanity of the old syntax inherited from Homer”, and felt the urgent need to drag words out of their Latin period prisons.⁶¹ He calls for a destruction of syntax and a scattering of one’s nouns at random, “just as they are born.” Verbs should be used in the infinitive form because then “they adapt themselves elastically to nouns and don’t subordinate them to the writer’s I that observes or imagines.”⁶² Marinetti favours certain parts of speech such as the noun and the verb in the infinitive form, and deplores others, such as adjectives, adverbs and the “connecting strings of syntax” in general – conjunctions, determiners, pronouns and prepositions. He not only calls for the abandonment of hierarchically structured sentences and phrases, but even opposes the use of sub-morphemic modifiers which transform pure lexemes into unambiguous grammatical word-forms. Words should be “denuded”, freed from any syntactical markers and obligations and thus become adaptable and multifunctional, “round like a wheel”. Marinetti writes:

Many times I have demonstrated how the noun, enfeebled by multiple contacts or the weight of Parnassian and decadent adjectives, regains its absolute value and its expressive force when it is denuded and set apart. [...] The infinite verb, on the other hand, is the very movement of the new lyricism, having the fluency of a train’s wheel or an aeroplane’s propeller. [...] The infinitive is the passion of the *I* that abandons itself to the becoming of all, the heroic disinterested continuity of the joy and effort of acting.⁶³

Essentially, Marinetti aims to cut and eradicate all those elements from language which serve the purpose of building a coherent and unambiguous sequence: hierarchically organised syntactic constructions are replaced by paratactical ones, hypotaxis is substituted with a radicalised version of parataxis. Logical relationships

⁶¹ F.T. Marinetti, “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature 1912”, p. 88.

⁶² Ibid., p. 84.

⁶³ F.T. Marinetti, “Geometric and Mechanical Splendour and the Numerical Sensibility 1914”, p. 156.

between the given elements are no longer made explicit. However, in contrast to Apollinaire, who also put into play the causal connections between parts of speech on the level of sentences and phrases, Marinetti does not intend to question the possibility of meaning in general or to destabilise the chain of signification. Quite on the contrary, words-in-freedom are essentially a form of verbal compression: all that is not absolutely indispensable is obliterated from discourse in the quest for poetic economy and the essential.

“Zang Tumb Tumb” is commonly considered as the most poignant example of Marinetti’s words-in-freedom poetry. The several pages long war poem, published in 1914, is a non-syntactic account of the Serbian-Bulgarian siege of Adrianopoli in Turkey during the First Balkan War in October 1912, during which Marinetti worked as a war correspondent for the French newspaper *L’Intransigeant*. In different chapter-like sections of the poem, Marinetti depicts the mobilisation of troops and their preparation for battle, the siege of Adrianopolis by the Bulgarians and the ensuing food shortages, lootings, hangings and the surrender of the Turks, the capture of a Turkish observation balloon, the fight over a bridge, accounts of battles, and the attack on a train filled with injured Turkish soldiers.⁶⁴

Some of Marinetti’s poetic demands are put into effect here: “Zang Tumb Tumb” features the insertion of tables, synchronic charts, a visual poem, non-linear arrangements of lines, word columns, singular scattered letters over a page, the use of brackets, different degrees of boldness and sizes of letters, the insertion of mathematical and musical signs, orthographic violations, diverse typefaces and various onomatopoetic devices. Throughout the poem, vowels and consonants are doubled or multiplied, as in “train express-express-express-expressssssss press-press-press-press-press-press-press-pressssssss”.⁶⁵ On the very first page of the poem, the birth of poetry is announced as a “designed analogy”: the sequence

⁶⁴ The full-length poem has not been translated into English yet. For this thesis, a selection of translated parts of the poem has been consulted. F.T. Marinetti, “Zong Toomb Toomb”. In: F.T. Marinetti, *Selected Poems and Related Prose*. Selected by Luce Marinetti. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 53-76. The translation of the “Bombardamento” section discussed in detail in this thesis is by Zbigniew Folejewski. F.T. Marinetti, “Bombardment”. In: Zbigniew Folejewski, *Futurism and its Place in the Development of Modern Poetry*, pp. 182-187. The original text was published by Marinetti in his own printing press in 1914. F.T. Marinetti, *Zang Tumb Tuuum. Adrianopoli Ottobre 1912. Parole in Libertà*. Milan: Edizioni Futuriste di ‘Poesia’, 1914.

⁶⁵ F.T. Marinetti, “Zong Toomb Toomb”. In: F.T. Marinetti, *Selected Poems and Related Prose*. Selected by Luce Marinetti. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2002, p. 57.

“poetry being born” is gradually increasing in size, growing literally, and it thus performs its meaning iconically.⁶⁶

The *parole in libertà* technique features most prominently in the last section of the poem entitled “Bombardment”. “Bombardment” consists of a seemingly continuous sequence of words with gaps of irregular sizes in between. All 68 lines are horizontal and run parallel, most even conform to both a left- and a right-aligned justified margin, which underscores the prose-like impression of the text-body. The only eye-catching typographical devices employed are the occasional use of bold typefaces, italics and capital letters. The gaps between the words are irregular; sometimes two words occupy one line, sometimes eight. Only in lines 31-36, where a burning fort is described, is space used more innovatively: the word “flames” is scattered nine times across the page, conveying the image of an irregularly burning fire which dances before the recipient’s eyes.

A radicalised form of the figure enjambement can be detected on the level of word: words are often split into parts, running over from one line to the next, like “cud-/gel” (lines 49-50), or “te-/lephone” (lines 37-38). The poem thus appears indeed like the breathless, excited report of a person in an “intense zone of life”, which is underscored by the total absence of punctuation.⁶⁷

“Bombardment” is a synaesthetic battle-description trying to render the turmoil of war in a direct, sensual fashion: a poetic persona seems to stand in the midst of a battlefield, registering visual, acoustic and olfactory sense-impressions. Cannons fire, explosions blast, shells fly past. Bulgarian battalions march by, horses rear up and officers shout. Onomatopoeia is used frequently, as the poetic persona scans the “strange mad most/ agitated piercing notes of the battle” (lines 9-10), and when a massacre of horses is described: “rear/ing of horses **flic flac zing zing shiaaak**/hilarious neighing **eeeeeee**... shuffling of feet [...]” (lines 20-22). The burning of a fort is depicted, and a telephone call of a Turkish officer to “27 forts in Turkish in German” is overheard. Flutes, birds, grenades and hurling shrapnel are

⁶⁶ Another example for iconic language usage, words that share visual qualities with that which they denote, is Francesco Canguillo’s word-painting “Grand foule sur la Piazza del Popolo” from 1914, in which words seem to perform their meaning, such as “GOOnfiori”, “swelling”, which swells, or “tirare”, “to pull or stretch”, which is stretched out over the page, or “prepotenza”, “arrogance”, which is written in red.

⁶⁷ Cf. John J. White, *Literary Futurism*, pp. 186-187.

registered; scenarios of smoke, mud, dung and violent explosions are conjured up, and a gilded military balloon is observed.

Onomatopoeic battle-sounds like “taratatata”; “pic-pac-pum-tumb”, “ching buuum” feature heavily. According to Marinetti, onomatopoeic elements are to vivify lyricism with “crude and brutal elements of reality”. Marinetti aspires to a “swift, brutal and immediate lyricism”, a “telegraphic lyricism with no taste of the book about it but, rather, as much as possible of the taste of life.”⁶⁸ Onomatopoeia is celebrated as one of the most dynamic elements of poetry: “Direct, imitative, elementary, realistic onomatopoeia, which serves to enrich lyricism with a brute reality, which keeps it from becoming too abstract or artistic.”⁶⁹

Musical commandos like “SLOW TWO TEMPI” (line 24) and “PRESTO” in line 28 allude to the orchestra-theme running through the poem: “Zang Tumb Tuuum” is essentially an orchestration of the sounds, sights and smells of battle, an “orchestra of the noises of war/swelling under a note of silence” (lines 63-64). In fact the poetic persona seems to consider the battlefield as a “theatre width 300 square kilometers” (lines 54-55). Orchestra, “plaaaaay plaaaaay Grrrrreat/ rattles do not erase [...]” (lines 51-52), it revels in it.⁷⁰

In analogy to the events of the combat zone, White points out, Marinetti’s “language explodes, just as the shrapnels do on the field of battle”, as if he not only wanted to convey a vivid image of war, but to actually recreate a war scenario in the realms of language as well, both in an iconic and a performative sense.⁷¹ Indeed, in some parts of the poem, language is in pieces, exploded, taken apart, manifest above all in the numerous gaps. Radical ellipsis is the leading poetic principle in these passages: redundant words are removed, literally cut out of the poem. This abandonment results in chains of nouns, like lines 7-8: “explosions cuts fists blows batteries rapid/

⁶⁸ F.T.Marinetti, “Destruction of Syntax – Imagination without Strings – Words-in Freedom 1913”, p. 104.

⁶⁹ F.T.Marinetti, “Geometric and Mechanical Splendour and the Numerical Sensibility 1914”, p. 157.

⁷⁰ White defines the poetic persona as orchestrator: “The poet is an orchestrator, for not only does he observe and share with us the impression of combat; he also makes us feel that he is virtually arranging the battle, conducting it even, for our edification. He is its organizer, not just a privileged participant. [...] As the work proceeds, the poet progresses noticeably from being a mere observer [...] to the role of exhorter and conductor [...]. ‘How magnificent’ is his reaction as he sees the flames destroying the positions and in response, as if rising to the occasion, he creates his own comparable destruction of the word for the enemy position.” John J. White, *Literary Futurism*, pp. 183-185.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 185.

volleys Violence ferociousness regularity”. Noun-chains feature also in lines 40-42: “echoes prompters/ scenarios of smoke forests/ applauses smell of hay mud dung [...]”. A chain of prepositions conveys vividly the hectic atmosphere, danger and dynamism on the battlefield: “up down here there around up high watch out/above the head **chiaak** beautiful Flames” (lines 29-30).

However, the poem is only partially a realisation of Marinetti’s poetic demands, for it is interspersed with many rather conventional lyricisms. Contrary to Marinetti’s claim, the lyrical I is not eliminated, but is constantly present as registering subject which experiences, enjoys and transmits the rapid succession of events. “What joy to see hear smell everything everything” (line 13), it glories, and the visual, acoustic and olfactory sense impressions make up the largest part of the poem. Adjectives, adverbs and conjunctions are similarly not totally abandoned, nor are grammatical structures per se entirely absent. Lines 9-10 for instance, “this low heavy scanning of the strange mad most/ agitated piercing notes of battle [...]”, do not seem to adhere to Marinetti’s tenets at all. Moreover, words which are adaptable and “round like wheels” are also very rare; mostly, the way in which they relate to other words is rather unambiguous and predetermined.⁷²

This discrepancy between theoretical demands and actual works seems to result from the fact that poetic theory emerged before poetic practice. Project preceded work and meta-language creation, as Giovanni Lista put it. The first manifesto with poetical demands, the “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature”, was launched in May 1912. The first – rather unimpressive – example of futurist literature, “Bataille. Poids

⁷² Marinetti also performed the poem in numerous cities, amongst them in Petersburg, where the audience remained rather unimpressed. One very valid objection that was voiced was that by dint of his recital, Marinetti reinstated all he had omitted from the printed version by means of suggestive gestures, mimicry and intonation, thus basically nullifying and sabotaging his obliterations, which he, in effect, merely replaced with other means of expression.

Marjorie Perloff writes: “When Marinetti gave a reading from his *Zang Tumb Tuum* in Petersburg in the winter of 1914, the audience, composed largely of Russian avant-garde poets and painters, was skeptical. [...] [Benedikt] Livshits [...] objected to Marinetti’s poetic doctrine on the grounds that the so-called destruction of syntax was violated by Marinetti’s performance itself. He asked Marinetti: ‘What is the point of piling up amorphous words, a conglomeration which you call ‘words at liberty’? To eliminate the intermediary role of reason by producing disorder, right? However, there’s a large gulf between the typographical composition of your *Zang-Tum-Tumb* and your recitation. ... is it worth destroying the traditional sentence, even the way you do, in order to reinstate it, to restore its logical predicate by suggestive gestures, mime, intonation and onomatopoeia?’ Forced to grant that there was some truth to this objection, Marinetti insisted that, nevertheless, his manifestos preached a wholly revolutionary doctrine and that Italian Futurist painters were doing something quite new.” Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment*, p. 64.

+ Odeur", however, was published only three months later in the supplement to the manifesto.⁷³ Regarding the apparent gulf between theory and practice, Lista claims that "*the wireless imagination* was 'never realised' and remained 'a secondary hypothesis in Marinetti's manifestos' [...]."⁷⁴ Perloff even goes so far as to claim that the true literary artworks of the Futurists are their manifestos, that "the theory, in Russolo's as in Marinetti's manifestos, is the practice".⁷⁵

To talk about art becomes equivalent to making it, and indeed most historians of Italian Futurism agree that the series of fifty-odd manifestos published between 1909 and Italy's entrance into the war in 1915 were the movement's literary form par excellence. Not only are Marinetti's manifestos more interesting than his poems, novels, or even than such experimental collage texts as the problematic *Zang Tumb Tuuum*; his *arte di far manifesti* became a way of questioning the status of traditional genres and media, of denying the separation between, say, lyric poem and short story or even between poem and picture.⁷⁶

It is true indeed that the manifestos appear much more radical, theoretically challenging and remarkable than Marinetti's poems themselves. It seems as if futurist poetic practice could never quite catch up with its theory, actual works themselves never consequently effectuating the radical demands of the manifestos. Or, if they did, as in the case of "Bataille. Poids + Odeur", the idea itself remained more appealing than the poetic realisation.

Fundamentally, in theory and partly in practice, Marinetti aims to bombard the reader with concentrated lyricism: poignant concepts, only those which are absolutely necessary, uttered economically, quickly and directly, in a telegraphic fashion, minus the connecting threads of syntax. Syntax, in fact language generally, is an intermediary, and Marinetti prefers direct essences:

⁷³ "Bataille. Poids + Odeur" is perhaps a more consequential effectuation of Marinetti's poetic demands than "Zang Tumb Tuuum" – it is basically an unconnected string of nouns, and is devoid of any poetic appeal. Here, Perloff's verdict on Marinetti's words-in-freedom, which she calls "montage-strings", seems to apply: "The variety of typefaces, the use of plus (+) signs and phonetic spelling, the heavy alliterations and assonances cannot disguise the fact that Marinetti's *parole in libertà* are basically just lists [...]. The structural principle operative, in other works, is less that of collage than of catalog." Ibid., p. 61.

⁷⁴ Quoted from John J. White, *Literary Futurism*, pp. 172-173.

⁷⁵ Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment*, p. 92.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 90-92.

Syntax was a kind of interpreter or monotonous cicerone. This intermediary must be suppressed, in order that literature may enter directly into the universe and become one body with it. [...]
Only the unsyntactical poet who unlinks his words can penetrate the essence of matter and destroy the dumb hostility that separates it from us.⁷⁷

The dissection of language on the level of syntax as advocated in Marinetti's manifestos essentially represents the attempt to render language more powerful, immediate, efficient and direct: the sounds and shapes of words are deployed strategically to enhance its expressive force and to fortify and support its semantic load. Marinetti's objective, in contrast to many other avant-garde poets, is not to problematise meaning, to destabilise it, to render it ambiguous and to neglect it in favour of the material facts of language, but he aims to enhance it. It is not just the content itself which is problematic in Marinetti's poetry, but also the very fact that he is still committed to the transmission of concrete subject matter in the first place: this above all is what separates him from most other avant-garde poets. Marinetti seems not so much interested in challenging established ways of thinking and in triggering thought processes, but rather aims at communicating slogans and new sensibilities.⁷⁸ Ultimately, Marinetti endeavours to upgrade and arm language with additional possibilities of expression in order to make it capable of adequately conveying the numerous simultaneous sensations which assault the modern consciousness as a result of a drastically altered surrounding and a significantly faster pace of life more effectively.

⁷⁷ F.T. Marinetti, "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature 1912", p. 88.

⁷⁸ Adorno defines exactly this as the crux of Brecht's works, arguing that it was Brecht's intention, "Denkprozesse in Bewegung zu setzen, nicht Kernsprüche mitzuteilen [...]." This objective applies to most avant-garde poets as well. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003, p. 54.

3. UTOPIA AND MORPHOLOGY: KHLEBNIKOV'S VISIONS

3.1 The Babel-Incident or the Reinstatement of Linguistic Harmony

"We teach that the word controls the brain, the brain controls the hands, and the hands control kingdoms", proclaims the Russian Cubo-Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov in 1913.¹ "Self-sufficient speech is the bridge to a self-sufficient kingdom."² Perhaps most firmly of all poets of the avant-garde, Khlebnikov believes that language is the single most powerful and effective tool for a reformation of mankind, and, in its current state, one of the main causes for its prevalent dilemmas:

Every system of auditory currency claims supremacy, and so languages as such serve to disunite mankind and wage spectral wars. Let us hope that one single written language may henceforth accompany the longterm destinies of mankind and prove to be the new vortex that unites us, the new integrator of the human race.³

Khlebnikov aspires to nothing less than the restoration of a state of pre-Babylonian linguistic unity which would reunite all mankind: "There was a time when language united people. [...] Language unites them like a familiar voice."⁴ Wars, arguments and misunderstandings, according to Khlebnikov, are nothing but the result of failed communication, which in turn is due to the inexact, inadequate nature of language, and, above all, a consequence of the fact that there is not one language, but many:

If we think deeply about it, we realize that weapons are only a supplementary dictionary for dealing with those who speak a different language. A pocket dictionary.⁵

¹ Velimir Khlebnikov, "The Warrior of the Kingdom". In: Velimir Khlebnikov, *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov. Letters and Theoretical Writings*, vol. 1. Edited by Charlotte Douglas. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 293.

Other Cubo-Futurists besides Khlebnikov included Vladimir Mayakovsky, David, Vladimir and Nikolai Burliuk, Vasily Kamensky, Alexei Kruchenykh, Elena Guro and Benedict Livshits.

² Velimir Khlebnikov, "Artists of the World! (a written language for Planet Earth: a common system of hieroglyphs for the people of our planet)". In: *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov. Letters and Theoretical Writings*, pp. 364-365.

³ Velimir Khlebnikov, "The Warrior of the Kingdom", p. 293.

⁴ Velimir Khlebnikov, "Our Fundamentals". In: *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov. Letters and Theoretical Writings*, p. 378.

⁵ Ibid., p. 378.

Khlebnikov considers the diversity of languages a curse, a punishment imposed on humankind, a notion very much akin to that in the parable about hubris and nemesis, the building of the Tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues in ancient Babylon in the book of Genesis, which begins with the words “Now the whole earth had one language and few words.” However, humans decided to “make a name” for themselves and began to build a tower “with its top in the heavens”, thus boldly penetrating into God’s territory. This was perceived as an act of hubris, as a symbolic violation of frontiers, and as a warning sign displaying the potentially dangerous power of a united human race not yet subdivided into conflicting factions, and God spoke:

‘Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.’⁶

The confusion of tongues and the imposition of multilinguality presents a deliberate attempt to restrict and limit the potential of mankind; it is an impediment and handicap designed to keep humans from becoming too powerful, a means of artificially imposing rupture.⁷ In this parable, the latently dangerous potential that comes with the possibility of limitless communication is acknowledged, and identified as a threat against which measures have to be taken in order to keep humanity in its place.⁸

Khlebnikov too recognises the potential that lies in a singular shared language, but he is more optimistic in its assessment: he believes that it is the basic prerequisite for a peaceful world order and that it would ultimately serve to unify mankind:

The goal is to create a common written language shared by all the peoples of this third satellite of the Sun, to invent written symbols that can be

⁶ Genesis 11:1-9.

⁷ Speakers of Esperanto have been persecuted both in the Third Reich and under Stalin for similar reasons: the idea that people all over the world could communicate with each other and exchange ideas freely without language impediments must have seemed a dangerous threat to repressive systems.

⁸ The concrete poet John Furnival also explored the Babel-theme and the confusion of noises in a poem called “The Fall of the Tower of Babel” from 1964. John Furnival, “The Fall of the Tower of Babel”. In: Emmett Williams, *Anthology of Concrete Poetry*. New York; Frankfurt: Something Else Press, 1967.

understood and accepted by our entire star [...]. Languages have betrayed their glorious beginnings. [...] Nowadays sounds have abandoned their past function and serve the purpose of hostility; they have become differentiated auditory instruments for the exchange of rational wares; they have divided multilingual mankind into different camps involved in tariff wars, into a series of verbal marketplaces beyond whose confines any given language loses currency.⁹

Khlebnikov's linguistic endeavours, designed to overcome the "barrier of the mountain chains of languages", are deeply utopian efforts to improve the condition of humanity.¹⁰ Exact communication is the only way to a better world, and only a shared, more rational and precise language will enable mankind to unfold its true potential. "No public accounting has really been made of the harm caused by improper verbal constructions", Khlebnikov maintains.¹¹ Though Khlebnikov is highly dissatisfied with the current condition of language, he is not at all a language sceptic in a conventional sense: he is not doubting the capability of language to represent reality in general, but rather wants to refine and enlarge the existing conceptual range. Moreover, he is a visionary idealist, a language utopian, believing firmly in language's ability to transform and unite mankind.

3.2 Science and the Search for a Cosmic Principle

Unlike those of many other avant-gardists, Khlebnikov's efforts are not confined to the realm of art. Instead, he taps freely into diverse disciplines in search of a holistic all-encompassing theory that would explain the general laws of time, history and nature. Social utopia, linguistic reflections and the creation of *zaum*, the Russian Cubo-Futurists' trans-mental or beyond-sense language, go hand in hand with a variety of scientific explorations in search of a prototypical cosmic principle of

⁹ Velimir Khlebnikov, "Artists of the World! (a written language for Planet Earth: a common system of hieroglyphs for the people of our planet)", pp. 364-365.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 369. However, before envisaging a universal language, Khlebnikov aimed at a renovation and purification of the Russian and Slavic languages only, at cleaning them from latinised words, enabling a free combination of the entire range of all Slavonic roots. His then resolute pan-Slavic and anti-Western stances culminated in the idea of expanding the boundaries of the Russian language into the dictionaries of Czechoslovakia, Serbia and Poland. "To find, without breaking the circle of roots, the philosophers' stone for transforming all Slavonic words, one into another – freely fuse Slavonic words – that is my first attitude towards the word. This is the self-sufficient word beyond daily life, and everyday uses." Quoted from Raymond Cooke, *Velimir Khlebnikov – a critical study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 69.

¹¹ Velimir Khlebnikov, "Our Fundamentals", p. 376.

organisation. Khlebnikov collects, classifies and analyses data from all fields of human knowledge: history, mathematics, art, geography, biology, anthropology, physics and mythology. While other poets at the beginning of the 20th century transgressed the boundaries between the arts, Khlebnikov trespasses between arts and science, attempting to abolish the “cages and barriers” between them in a truly interdisciplinary spirit.¹² Not only does he try to detect logical principles behind the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, but he also works on equations for the laws of time and history in order to predict and influence their course.

Charlotte Douglas has drawn attention to the importance of developments in science for both painters and poets in Russia, arguing that the flowering of holistic visions at the beginning of the past century was encouraged by the transformation of the Newtonian universe into the Einsteinian one. The new breed of scientists, Douglas argues, abandoned the search for truth and the essence of things, and constructed models which attempted to synchronise and put together all kinds of available information from different fields instead. “Art also became a kind of model-building,” she writes, “a means to knowledge of a reality which is not accessible by purely deductive means.”¹³ Art was not just mirror anymore, not just the imitation of an existing reality, but became a vehicle for the bold imagination of a possible new order of the world. Information from all branches of human activities now seemed legitimate material for the artist: “Because the scientists were busy rearranging their visions of the universe”, Douglas claims, “artists suddenly felt free to do the same”¹⁴ Khlebnikov’s collection and classification of all varieties of data was a highly idealistic endeavour: he believed in the existence of a prototypical cosmic principle of organisation and in predictable patterns in nature and history. The discovery of these principles, he felt, would dramatically improve the general condition of

¹² Cf. Paul Smith and Charlotte Douglas, who write: “Khlebnikov ultimately saw this reach into all disciplines as a method that he called ‘the new creativity’ – a mode of thought in which the ‘cages and barriers’ of the various areas of knowledge were abolished and the artist-scientist roamed the world of ideas freely, in search of evidence for the great natural Law.” Paul Schmidt and Charlotte Douglas, “Introduction”. In: *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov. Letters and Theoretical Writings*, p. 167.

¹³ Charlotte Douglas, “Views from the New World. A. Kruchenykh and K. Malevich: Theory and Painting”. In: Ellendea Proffer and Carl R. Proffer (eds.), *The Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1980, p. 359.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 359. A remarkable number of the Cubo-Futurists were actually trained in science, including Khlebnikov, who studied mathematics at the university of Kazan.

humankind, for it would permit insight into the very way the universe works, and allow humans to predict the workings of nature and history, as well as guarantee a better understanding of the world in general. According to Khlebnikov's holistic vision, everything in the universe is organised according to the laws of a singular cosmic code, and consequently, the key to this code can be found in all manifestations of human nature and in all its sub-systems as well, including the language system. Khlebnikov, Smith and Douglas maintain, was on a constant search for "the equations that ran the world, the stable mathematical patterns concealed beneath the outward clutter of life". They state:¹⁵

[...] words became subject to the deep scrutiny of analytical dissection and deductive reasoning and, illustrative of the operation of an "essential property of the Universe", could be expected therefore to reveal something about the natural world. Art was an investigation for Khlebnikov, a creative search for the underlying cosmic order; to find it would be to make life whole.¹⁶

Khlebnikov's poetry and utopian social visions, they argue, were for him "but two aspects of this more general lifelong exploration of the nature of the world and history – and of time, the continuous creator of the first two."¹⁷ The Formalist critic Yury Tynyanov recognises the latent revolutionary potential of Khlebnikov's poetry by acknowledging that Khlebnikov was not only interested in a reformation of language structures, but that his linguistic explorations were motivated by a desire to transform all kinds of stagnating structures in other spheres as well. Therefore, Khlebnikov's literary revolution was not unlike a political one, Tynyanov writes:

Khlebnikov was able to produce a revolution in literature because his structure was not exclusively literary, because he comprehended by it both the language of verse and the language of numbers, both chance conversations on the street and the events of world history, and because for

¹⁵ Paul Schmidt and Charlotte Douglas, "Introduction", p. 166.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 166. They specify further: "Khlebnikov was convinced that the world was one, and that language, images and events were governed not only by the laws specific to them, but also ultimately by a "general principle" that determined every force in the world. Human language was for him only one way into this natural world; as an organic, evolving part of human nature, language must necessarily also contain keys to the way the universe works, and to understand the one, the poet believed, was also to possess a vital part of the other." Ibid.

him there was very little distance between the methods of the literary revolution and those of historical revolutions.¹⁸

Khlebnikov's meticulous studies of linguistic principles are thus only one facet in his more ambitious holistic quest: language is exemplary for and indicative of a more general pattern of organisation, and the exploration of language is consequently pursued with almost religious zeal.

3.3 The Semanticisation of the Signifier

Khlebnikov not only strongly believed in the capacity of language to serve as a tool for the transformation of humanity, and that it holds the key to a higher cosmic principle of organisation, but he also attributed semantic values and concepts to singular letters, particularly to those at the beginning of words:

In the initial consonant we see the bearer of destiny and the path of forces that give it a fateful significance. [...] Consequently a word has a three-fold nature: it is sound, concept and a path of fate.¹⁹

He believed in a conceptual nature of language, in essential and pure ideas which are hidden behind words and even singular sounds: "The conceptual configuration of language is more ancient than the sound configuration," he writes, "it does not change when language does, but repeats itself in subsequent locutions."²⁰ He states:

We remind you in passing that besides the language of words there is the silent language of concepts formed by mental units (the tissue of concepts that controls the language of words).²¹

At roughly the same time as de Saussure formulated his linguistic theory about the arbitrariness of the relation between signifier and signified, Khlebnikov took an antagonistic stance: he semanticised both sounds and shapes of singular letters and equipped them with general conceptual meanings. Whereas de Saussure maintains that

¹⁸ Yury Tynyanov, "About Khlebnikov (Introduction to the Complete Works of Khlebnikov, Leningrad, 11/1928)". In: Christopher Pike (ed.), *The Futurists, the Formalists, and the Marxist Critique*. London: Ink Links, 1979, p. 153.

¹⁹ Velimir Khlebnikov, "The Warrior of the Kingdom", p. 293.

²⁰ Velimir Khlebnikov, "Oleg and Kazimir". In: *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov. Letters and Theoretical Writings*, p. 297.

²¹ Velimir Khlebnikov, "The Warrior of the Kingdom", p. 293.

there are no positive values in language and that all meaning is entirely based on convention and an arbitrary system of internal differences, Khlebnikov argues the exact opposite.²² “If we assemble all the words that begin with the same consonantal sound”, he states, “we observe that, just as meteors often fall from one single point in the sky, all these words fly from the single point of a certain conceptualisation of space.”²³ He contends that conceptual values are ingrained in singular letters, for example “B (v) in all languages means the turning of one point around an other, either in a full circle or only a part of one, along an arc, or up and down”, or “X (kh) means a closed curve that shields the location of one point from the movement toward it of another point (a protective line).”²⁴ Moreover, in the dialogue “Teacher and Student”, written in 1912, he introduces his concept of “internal declension”, the idea that the interior structure of a word is also subject to declension:

Student: “However – have you ever heard of internal declension? Of case endings inside the word? [...] For instance, *bobr* in Russian means a beaver, a perfectly harmless rodent, while *babr* is a tiger, a terrifying beast of prey – but each represents a different case – accusative and genitive – of the common stem *bo*; the very structure of the words demonstrates that a beaver is something to be followed, hunted like a game, while a tiger is something to be feared, since now a man may become the game and be hunted by the animal. Here a very simple element changes the meaning of a verbal structure by changing its case. The first word makes it apparent that the aggressive act is directed against the animal (accusative case – *bo* – action toward), while in the second word it is clear that the aggressive act proceeds from the animal (genitive case – *ba* – action whence).”²⁵

²² De Saussure writes: “Si la partie conceptuelle de la valeur est constituée uniquement par des rapports et des différences avec les autres termes de la langue, on peut en dire autant de sa partie matérielle. [...] Tout ce qui précède revient à dire que dans la langue il n’y a que des différences. Bien plus: une différence suppose en général des termes positifs entre lesquels elle s’établit; mais dans la langue il n’y a que des différences sans termes positifs. Qu’on prenne le signifié ou le signifiant, la langue ne comporte ni des idées ni des sons qui préexisteraient au système linguistique, mais seulement des différences phoniques issues de ce système. Ce qu’il y a d’idée ou de matière phonique dans un signe importe moins que ce qu’il y a autour de lui dans les autres signes. La preuve en est que la valeur d’une terme peut être modifiée sans qu’on touche ni à son sens ni à ses sons, mais seulement par le fait que tel autre terme voisin aura subi une modification [...]” Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, pp. 163-166.

²³ Velimir Khlebnikov, “Artists of the World! (a written language for Planet Earth: a common system of hieroglyphs for the people of our planet)”, p. 367.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 365.

²⁵ Velimir Khlebnikov, “Teacher and Student”. In: *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov. Letters and Theoretical Writings*, p. 277.

Khlebnikov's studies have been disparaged as "false etymologies", "poet's linguistics" and "pseudo-linguistic" acts of "oversemanticization" by White.²⁶ His numerous studies and findings, including meticulously assembled lists of words that share "silent concepts", do indeed appear slightly bizarre with hindsight, even though there are now linguistic terms to designate these endeavours, such as phonetic-semantic resemblance or phonetic symbolism. However, it is important to note that when Khlebnikov conducted these studies, there was not yet a firmly established science of language nor a fixed set of linguistic vocabulary, and concepts like signifier and signified, phoneme and morpheme were not yet terms of common usage. Ideas about language are always closely interrelated with the state of theoretical and philosophical discourse about it, and Khlebnikov could not draw upon the body of theory that we can today. Above all, these studies bear witness once more to the serious and almost reverential way in which Khlebnikov approaches language. But most importantly, his poetic works inspired and sparked off a groundbreaking set of theoretical assumptions about language and literature, which would be of crucial significance for both the development of literary theory and the study of linguistics.

3.4 Cubo-Futurism and the Formalist Nexus

"The Futurist movement has undoubtedly dramatized the need for an adequate system of scientific poetics", Victor Ehrlich states, arguing that Russian Futurism was one of the main driving forces behind the emergence of Russian Formalism.²⁷ Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Boris Eikhenbaum and other members of the group frequently attended the Russian Futurists' literary evenings, and found that these poetic works called for new methods of theoretical assessment. In fact the Cubo-Futurists' poetry inspired and exemplified many of the Formalists' basic tenets. The Formalists considered the Cubo-Futurists' and Khlebnikov's works in particular as

²⁶ John J. White writes: "Many of the Futurist poets not only dissected and inventively explored aspects of language in their literary works; they also theorized about language – in manifestos, declarations, essays, dialogues, and treatises. However, many of the ideas they put forward could at best be described as quasi-linguistic or as a form of poet's linguistics. More often than not, those so engaged were concerned with positing ingenious (false) etymologies, or attributing semantic value to sub-morphemic units, or inventing links between words that were in fact, philologically speaking, unrelated." John J. White, *Literary Futurism*, p. 273.

²⁷ Victor Ehrlich, *Russian Formalism. History – Doctrine*. The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1969, p. 49.

epitomising what they had identified as the ultimate literary principle: *ostranenie*, the act of defamiliarising and making strange, the deliberate complication of form and the baring of the linguistic devices, so that automatised habits of perception are interrupted, forcing the recipient to engage more thoroughly with the material dimension of language and to question conventional perceptions of literature and life. According to the Formalists, the process of perception has to be emphasised and prolonged, by artificially impeding it with difficult and unfamiliar forms, since it is the act of perception itself which constitutes the crucial aesthetic experience.

Christopher Pike argues that the formalist investigation of the Futurists' poetic experiments, in particular their *zaum* and beyond-sense explorations, inspired one of the central concepts of Formalism, namely "the contrast between language as it appears in everyday reality ('practical' language) and language as it is constructed, organised or used in art ('poetic' language)."²⁸ The Formalists consider this difference as the key feature of literary language usage, as its very specificity. Poetic devices, they argue, wear out through time and usage, and cease to have an impact on the recipients. Therefore, new effects and devices need to be invented on a regular basis. This relentless and bold inventiveness, even if his works may lack scientific rigour, is one of the qualities Tynyanov admires most in Khlebnikov's work:

Opinions may be divided about Khlebnikov's numerical researches. Perhaps they seem to the specialist to lack foundation, while to the reader they are merely interesting. But if new phenomena are to emerge in literature, what is needed is relentless intellectual activity, and belief in it, together with the scientific processing of material – even if such work is unacceptable to science.²⁹

The Formalists consider literary history a constant periodic replacement of old techniques with new ones, a substitution of automatised and ineffective devices with defamiliarising ones. The insertion of neologisms, which is one of Khlebnikov's main poetic strategies, strikingly epitomises such defamiliarising procedures, since neologisms impede recognition, direct the attention towards language texture and materiality and explicitly bare the device of the activity of word formation.

²⁸ Christopher Pike, "Introduction". In: *The Futurists, the Formalists, and the Marxist Critique*, p. 10.

²⁹ Yury Tynyanov, "About Khlebnikov (Introduction to the Complete Works of Khlebnikov, Leningrad, 11/1928)", p. 153.

Tynyanov writes: "The foreground of his poems is occupied by bared construction. He is a poet of principle."³⁰

3.5 "We want literature to follow boldly after painting"

Once again, the encounter with Cubism was of vital importance for the Cubo-Futurists' poetic ventures as well. The Cubo-Futurists integrated the word "Cubo" into their name, very likely in order to pay homage to the techniques of fragmentation and dissection in Cubist paintings – techniques which were also applied in their poems.³¹ As Mojimír Grygar claims, Picasso's painterly dissections exercised a deep influence upon Khlebnikov's poetic productions and inspired his own technique of language dissection:

Es war die Begegnung mit den kubistischen Werken von Picasso, die ihm eine tiefe künstlerische Erfahrung vermittelten. Er prägte ein kämpferisches Schlagwort "poeziju nado raspikasit" (die Poesie muss man nach Picassos Vorbild demontieren, "entpicassieren") [...].³²

Vladimir Mayakovsky also draws explicit parallels between the "self-sufficient word", a cornerstone in the group's poetics, and the materials of painting which have gained autonomy from representing anything other than themselves in abstract painting:

Having established color, line and form as self-sufficient values, painting found its eternal path to development. Those who have discovered that the word, its outline and its phonic aspect determine the flourishing of poetry, have the right to exist.³³

³⁰ Yury Tynyanov, "Interval (To Boris Pasternak)". In: *The Futurists, the Formalists, and the Marxist Critique*, p. 123.

³¹ Raymond Cooke argues: "The term Cubo-Futurism clearly derives from the Cubist movement in art. This had its roots in France, but soon exerted influence in Russia on the work of artists and thence on the progressive writing of the period. This was particularly the case with the Hylaeans, since many of the writers associated with the group, including David Burliuk, Mayakovsky and Kruchonykh, came to poetry from painting." Raymond Cooke, *Velimir Khlebnikov. A critical study*, p. 11.

³² Mojimír Grygar, "Über die Auffassung der dichterischen Sprache in der europäischen Avantgarde (Komparatistische Randbemerkungen)". In: Walter Asholt and Wolfgang Fähnders (eds.), *Der Blick vom Wolkenkratzer. Avantgarde – Avantgardekritik – Avantgardeforschung*. Amsterdam; Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000, p. 297.

³³ Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Theater, Cinema and Futurism". In: *The Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism*, p. 181.

Khlebnikov programmatically calls for poets to pursue the same quests as painters. "Painting has always used a language accessible to everyone", he maintains, and declares.³⁴ "We want literature to follow boldly after painting."³⁵ He explicitly acknowledges the pivotal importance of advances in the realm of fine arts on the development of literature, and considers painting to be more progressive, always one step ahead of literature.

"Khlebnikov too was a competent artist and techniques in the visual arts clearly exerted an effect upon his writing", writes Raymond Cooke, and points out that many of the writers associated with the Cubo-Futurists, including the Burliuks, Mayakovsky and Alexei Kruchenykh, came to poetry from painting.³⁶ Pike argues as well that the close interconnection between painting and literature in the movement is a vital aesthetic factor, evident amongst other things in the beginning of the movement in impressionist and post-impressionist painting. He maintains that several protagonists began their career as painters: most "significant futurists at one time or another worked in both paint and ink."³⁷ Furthermore, the poets collaborated closely with leading avant-garde artists, such as Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova and the Burliuk brothers, and the visual aspects of language are continually emphasised by the focus on handwriting and typography, the use of wallpaper and illustrations.³⁸

In "Opening of an Art Gallery", written in 1918, Khlebnikov aptly observes the technique of dissection at work in images of Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich:

It is true that their work is frequently less a matter of painting than bold attempts to blow up the very foundations of painting; they are guided by this or that exploded precept of art. Just as chemists can split water into hydrogen and oxygen, so these artists have split the art of painting into its component forces, sometimes emphasising the principles of paint, sometimes of line.³⁹

³⁴ Velimir Khlebnikov, "Artists of the World! (a written language for Planet Earth: a common system of hieroglyphs for the people of our planet)", p. 364.

³⁵ Velimir Khlebnikov, "We want a word maiden". In: *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov. Letters and Theoretical Writings*, p. 246.

³⁶ Raymond Cooke, *Velimir Khlebnikov. A critical study*, p. 11.

³⁷ Christopher Pike, "Introduction", p. 4.

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁹ Velimir Khlebnikov, "Opening of an Art Gallery". In: *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov. Letters and Theoretical writings*, p. 442.

In many suprematist paintings, like Malevich's "Black Square", painting is indeed split into its component forces: colour, shape and line gain autonomy and become self-sufficient elements of composition.⁴⁰ Language, in Khlebnikov's work, is similarly dissected into its basic building blocks, directing attention to the organisation and structure of language and to the very act of the production of meaning.

3.6 Word Creation and the Laws of Morphology

One of the most important poetic techniques employed by Khlebnikov is word-creation, which is particularly manifest in his poem "Incantation by laughter", included in 1910 by Nikolay Kulbin in a publication accompanying an art exhibition entitled "Studio of Impressionists".⁴¹ Word creation is Khlebnikov's weapon against the "petrification of language", a means for reviving and dynamising the stagnating language system:

If contemporary man can restock the waters of exhausted rivers with fish,
then language husbandry gives us the right to restock the impoverished
streams of language with new life, with extinct or non-existent words. We
believe that they will begin to sparkle again, as in the first days of
Creation.⁴²

The activity of word formation is essentially motivated by a desire for more effective and concise communication; it constitutes an attempt to make communication more exact, a search for more precise and direct concepts. Language should become more flexible and allow for direct fusions of different concepts: "If two neighboring

⁴⁰ Charlotte Douglas likens Kruchenykh's zaum language to Malevich's paintings too: "the sets designed by Malevich for *Victory* work out the analogies drawn by Kruchenykh between the methods of futurist poets and painters. Just as Kruchenykh derived his zaum language from the splintering and reordering of words, Malevich here begins to slice objects apart. [...] 'We have cut the object!' Kruchenykh cried, 'We have begun to see through the world!'" Charlotte Douglas, "Views from the New World. A. Kruchenykh and K. Malevich: Theory and Painting", p. 365.

⁴¹ Most of Khlebnikov's works were published in small journals or collections edited by other artists, like Vasily Kamensky's journal *Spring*. The first joint publication of the Cubo-Futurists, the collection *Trap for Judges*, was printed on rough wallpaper in 1912. Raymond Cooke maintains: "When Khlebnikov did succeed in publishing his works they appeared for the most part in small journals and miscellanies which circulated only erratically, if at all." Raymond Cooke, *Velimir Khlebnikov. A critical study*, p. 2. In 1928, however, an edition of Khlebnikov's collected works was published, with a foreword by the formalist critic Tynyanov.

⁴² Velimir Khlebnikov, "Our Fundamentals", p. 382.

valleys are separated by a ridge of mountains, a traveller can do two things”, suggests Khlebnikov: “blow up the wall of mountains or begin a long and circuitous journey around them.”⁴³ He elaborates:

How often does the spirit of a language allow for the creation of some direct word, a simple alteration of the consonant sounds in an already existing word? Instead, an entire people uses complicated and brittle circumlocution and increases the loss of universal intelligence by the amount of time it takes to figure it out. Who wants to travel from Moscow to Kiev by way of New York? And yet what phrase from contemporary literary language is free from such detours? And all because there exists no science of word creation.⁴⁴

Khlebnikov’s deployment of language is marked by a diachronic rather than synchronic approach: he draws upon archaic vocabulary and freely borrows from all etymological stages of the Russian language. Khlebnikov employs present, past and potential future vocabulary, as well as words or roots from other mainly Slavic languages. His attempts to overcome the stagnation of the Russian language are thus evident in transgressions of combinatorial, national and temporal laws.

By means of word creation, Khlebnikov tries to extend the present range of words and augment the current means of expression. The expansion of a given stock of poetic vocabulary with neologisms and coinages is in fact one of the key programmatic demands of the Russian Cubo-Futurists in general, formulated in the manifesto “A Slap in the Face of Bourgeois Taste” in 1912, in which the concept of the “self-sufficient word” is introduced:

We decree that the following rights of poets be respected:
To enlarge the scope of the poet’s vocabulary with arbitrary and derivative words.
To feel insuperable hatred for the language that existed before them [...]
And if *for the time being* the filthy marks of your “common sense” and “good taste” remain in our lines, nevertheless, *for the first time* the lightning

⁴³ Jaques Derrida’s philosophical term “différance” is perhaps one of the best known coinages, in which the concepts of difference and deference have been fused by blowing up “the wall of mountains” between them through a deliberate violation of the rules governing writing and the consistent insertion of an “a” where an “e” should be. “Différance” weaves together two different lines of sense, capturing them in a new concept which poignantly contains and in fact performs in itself a whole theory about the nature of language.

⁴⁴ Velimir Khlebnikov, “Our Fundamentals”, p. 376.

flashes of the New Future Beauty of the Self-sufficient Word are already on them.⁴⁵

The attention to texture and phonic substance of the language material and the attack upon linguistic laws and conventions are two of the few shared concerns of the Italian and the Russians Futurists, but, as Mayakovsky writes, “ideologically, we have nothing in common with Italian Futurism”. “The common [ground] exists merely in the formal treatment of material.”⁴⁶ And while the Italians were mainly preoccupied with the abolition of the strings of syntax, the Russians’ concern is with the word: the self-sufficient word gains an aesthetic validity of its own and the poetic emphasis is on its texture and morphologic, phonetic, semantic and rhythmic structure.

In “The Letter as Such”, Khlebnikov complains about the careless unification of words and letters in standardised written language, which strips linguistic signs of any trace of individual expression: “Why don’t they just go ahead and dress [the word] up in gray prison clothes?” he asks:

You’ve seen the letters of their words – strung out in straight lines with shaved heads, resentful, each one like all the others – gray, colorless – not letters at all, just stamped out marks.⁴⁷

He pledges the resurrection of handwriting in order to bring back room for personal expression within the formal dimension of written language: “Our handwriting, distinctly altered by our mood, conveys that mood to the reader independently of the words.” “Incantation by Laughter” too is originally hand-written.

As White has pointed out, the nature of avant-gardistic language experiments is highly dependent on the specific character of the respective language of usage. English, for instance, is much poorer than Russian concerning the possibilities of word-formation as well as aural and semantic games. Russian and German, two inflectional languages, display a much higher degree of segmentability than English and Italian, and both the Cubo-Futurists and the German Expressionists were

⁴⁵ D. Burluk, Alexander Kruchenykh, V. Mayakovsky and V. Khlebnikov, “A Slap in The Face of Public Taste”. In: *The Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism*, p. 179.

⁴⁶ Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Futurism Today”. In: *The Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism*, p. 194.

⁴⁷ Velimir Khlebnikov, “The Letter as Such”. In: *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov. Letters and Theoretical writings*, p. 257.

consequently much more active in the field of word creation than the Italian Futurists or the Vorticists.⁴⁸ White maintains:

What emerges is evidence of the strong causal relationship between the type of effects achieved by Khlebnikov and the structural properties of the Russian language. Attempts at translating the work from an inflected and segmentable language like Russian into English (an uninflected and relatively 'unsupple' language, when it comes to word-formation) readily highlight operative differences.⁴⁹

Raymond Cooke too emphasises that Khlebnikov was operating in a language where "word formation was a relatively protean activity, something that is less the case in English."⁵⁰ The translation of the poem from Russian to English thus presents a real challenge to translators.⁵¹

Incantation by Laughter

Oh you laughniks, laugh it out!
Oh you laughniks, laugh it forth!
You who laugh it up and down.
Laugh along so laughily.
Laugh it off belaughingly!
Laughters of the laughing laughniks, overlaugh the laughathons!
Laughiness of the laughish laughers, counterlaugh the Laughdom's laughs!
Laughio! Laughio!
Dislaugh, relaugh, laughlets, laughlets.
Laughulets, laughulets.
Oh you laughniks, laugh it out!
Oh you laughniks, laugh it forth!

"Incantation by laughter" consists of twelve lines. They begin with capitalised initial letters and defy the conventional left-aligned layout. There are three different

⁴⁸ Particularly the Expressionist distinguished themselves by the composition of portmanteau-words, such as August Stramm's "schamzerpört".

⁴⁹ John J. White, *Literary Futurism*, p. 233.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ The choice of an appropriate English translation is consequently rather difficult. For this study Vladimir Markov's translation seems most adequate, since his focus is on the principle of construction, while he also adheres to the metrical scheme of the original. Cf. Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History*. London: Macgibbon & Kee/Linded, 1969, pp. 7-8.

Interestingly, various poets of the neo-avant-garde have also attempted to translate the poem, including Franz Mon, Gerhard Rühm and Hans Magnus Enzensberger. For different translations cf. Nils Åke Nilsson's essay "How to translate Avant-garde Poetry. Some attempts with Xlebnikov's 'Incantation by laughter'". In: Nils Åke Nilsson (ed.), *Vladimir Chlebnikov: A Stockholm Symposium*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1985. pp. 140-150.

positions on the page from which the lines depart. The poem encompasses a circular structure; it begins and ends with imperatives directed towards the implied addressees of the poem, the “laughniks”. Until line 5, they are urged to laugh: to “laugh it out/laugh it forth/laugh along/laugh it off”, to “overlaugh” and “counterlaugh” and in line 9 to “dislaugh, relaugh”. The “laughniks” are asked to respond to something with laughter, to liberate themselves by laughing something off and out. The imperative seems urgent, almost imploring, which is underscored by two exclamation marks and the interjection “oh” in the first two and the last two lines. In line 6, the “laughters” of the “laughniks” are personified and urged to “overlaugh” the “laughatons”; in line 7, “laughiness” is ordered to “counterlaugh the Laughdom’s laugh.” Line 8 seems to be the climax of the poem: “Laughio”, as Nils Åke Nilsson has suggested, could be modelled upon cheerio, and thus function as a toast or a salutation to laughter. It is followed by a poetic decrescendo, a relaxation after the climax, indicated by the diminutives “laughlets, laughlets” and “laughulets, laughulets”. The laughter fades out, slowly ebbs away and comes to an end. The semantic structure of climax and relaxation is also reflected in the formal features of the poem: there is a caesura in the regular rhyme scheme in line 8 and 10. In lines 6 and 7, 15 and 16 syllables feature, instead of 6, 7 or 8, as in the other lines. The poem ends with the same imperatives directed to the “laughniks” as at the beginning. The excessive use of exclamation marks reinforces the character of the poem as an appeal and produces a dynamic effect.⁵²

Surprisingly, Khlebnikov systematically employs a metrical pattern: lines 1 to 5 and 11 and 12 are catalectic tetrameters, which drop the final unstressed syllable of the four trochaic feet. Eight trochaic feet, again without the final unstressed syllable, feature in lines 6 and 7. Both lines 8 and 10 are composed of two feet dactyls (“Laughio, Laughio”; “Laughulets, Laughulets”), and line 9 is the only line with four regular trochaic feet. The principle at work here is strikingly methodological: all lines with four trochaic feet can clearly be recognised as being imperatives addressed to the “laughniks”, whereas the eight feet verses are apostrophically directed to the personified laughter itself. The metrical counterpoint, the two feet dactyls, in contrast, can not be attributed unambiguously to either. The rhyme scheme, the

⁵² Cf. *ibid.*

predominantly falling rhythm and the phonological repetitions contribute to the musical and even hypnotic quality of the poem.

Khlebnikov also employs a number of conventional rhetorical figures. Most frequently, he makes use of the figure polyptoton, the repetition of a word in different word forms, and the figura etymologica, the deployment of words with the same stem in different syntactic categories. Those two figures resemble the morphological operations of derivational and inflectional changes, the formation of new words by adding affixes and the variety in the form of a single word for grammatical purposes, which gives the poem a linguistic touch. "Laugh" appears in fifteen neologisms and in twenty-three different semantic constellations in total, in all major word classes as noun, verb, adverb and adjective. "Laugh" is the leitmotif of the poem: it is the centre of emphasis, frequently repeated and varied. In addition, apostrophe, alliterations and anaphora are employed; however, it is undoubtedly the neologisms that are the dominating poetic device.

The neologisms are all based on the root morpheme laugh. It is repeatedly merged with various prefixes and suffixes, which is the legitimate morphological operation of derivation. However, the combinations as such are not legitimate: they transgress the established combinatorial laws. There are nominal ("laughniks", "laughatons", "laughiness", "laughdom", "laughulets" and "laughlets"), verbal ("overlaugh", "counterlaugh", "dislaugh", "relaugh"), adjectival ("laughish") and adverbial ("belaughingly") variations.⁵³ Most of them are built according to the principle of morphemic analogy, according to existing patterns of word formation; they mimic the morphemic structure of legitimate words. "Laughnik", for instance, is formed on the analogy of beatnik; "laughador" mimics matador or troubadour; "laughdom" is modelled after kingdom or freedom.⁵⁴ The concepts which the affixes (such as "over", "counter", "re-" and "dis-") embody are also recognisable. Therefore, the recipient can deduce the sense of the neologisms both by combining the meanings of the two fused roots and by a comparison to analogously formed words.⁵⁵ The suffix "-dom", for instance, denotes a rank, condition or domain – hence "laughdom", like

⁵³ Cf. Raymond Cooke, *Velimir Khlebnikov. A critical study*, p. 71.

⁵⁴ Cf. Nils Åke Nilsson, "How to translate Avant-garde Poetry. Some attempts with Xlebnikov's 'Incantation by laughter'", p. 145.

⁵⁵ However, on an acoustic level, this issue becomes more difficult: the English pronunciation of "laugh" becomes instable in some coinages, especially when "laugh" is combined with a prefix.

“freedom”, can either mean the prevalence of the condition of laughter, or, like “kingdom”, a territory subject to the reign of laughter. The prefix “re-” signifies mutual, in return, as in react and respond; thus “relaugh” might designate to return laughter. Alternatively, it could be deployed in its frequentative or intensivating functions, as in “refine” or “redouble” – “relaugh” then may indicate to take up laughing again. The diminutive “laughlet” might, like “booklet” or “starlet”, denote a smaller or lesser kind of laughter, a little laughter.⁵⁶ The suffix “-nik” denotes a person involved in or associated with the thing or quality specified, like “peacenik” or “kibbutznik”, consequently a “laughnik” is a person involved in laughing. Since the process of production of meaning and the device of construction (prefix + root morpheme, or root morpheme + suffix) are bared, the recipient can observe *how* the coinages can mean something at all in the first place.

The title of the poem serves as a condensed programmatic: the “laughniks” and the recipient are “incantated by laughter”. “By laughter” could suggest that the invocation is conducted by means of a verbal chant, the textual construct created around the word “laugh”. Texture, structure and sound of the laughter-based verbal construct literally incantate the recipient. Alternatively, it might be laughter and laughing itself that allure, laughter as a concept and laughing as an activity. Perhaps the incantation is even “laughed out”, as Franz Mon suggests in the condensed title of his translation, “Beschwörung Lachen”. The poem might also be a response to Henri Bergson’s philosophical reflection upon the nature of the comic in *Le Rire*, published in 1900, or to the emphasis upon “Heiterkeit und Lachen” in Nietzsche’s work, as Nilsson has proposed.

There are numerous possibilities of interpretation, but three operative levels can be singled out: firstly, the “laughniks” are urged to laugh, to “overlaugh” and “counterlaugh”, by the imperative sentences. They are to react to and counter something with laughter. Nilsson suggests that the imperatives are directed to a group of young poets, that the poets are called upon to challenge the literary establishment, literally to laugh at it, to drown it in laughter. “The opposition of the avant-garde laughter is marked very clearly and the mission of the new poets is

⁵⁶ Cf. Nils Åke Nilsson, “How to translate Avant-garde Poetry. Some attempts with Xlebnikov’s ‘Incantation by laughter’”, p. 145.

stressed in provocative appeals”, maintains Nilsson.⁵⁷ And indeed, appeals such as “overlaugh the laughatons” and “counterlaugh the Laughdom’s laugh”, could be interpreted as subversive instruction to challenge the institution. Secondly, laughter itself is invoked, conjured up like a mystical spirit. Nilsson suggests that lines 7 to 9 contain the actual incantation, the spell, the magic formula. And lastly, the recipient is charmed by means of the verbal construct itself, the hypnotic repetition, the compelling sound structure and the dynamic rhythm.

Incantations are believed to have magic power, they operate with the spell of speech sounds and their evocative qualities. Nilsson points out that “Incantation by laughter” displays striking similarities with the formal qualities of charms and spells, such as the constant repetition of sounds, words and phrases, the suggestive sound pattern, the “secret” difficult form of the content and the circular structure. Khlebnikov was profoundly interested in magical spells, incantations and glossolalia; like these folkloristic forms, his poetry is meant to appeal to something beyond the intellect by circumnavigating the prerogative of logic and by impacting in a more direct, immediate fashion. Incantations, as well as the beyond-sense language, Khlebnikov argues, are “appeals over the head of the government straight to the population of feelings, a direct cry to the predawn of the soul [...]”.⁵⁸

People say a poem must be understandable. Like a sign on the street, which carries the clear and simple words “For sale”. [...] On the other hand, what about spells and incantations, what we call magic words [...] they are rows of mere syllables that the intellect can make no sense of, and they form a kind of beyonsense language in folk speech. They contain powerful magic. [...] The prayers of many nations are written in a language incomprehensible to those who pray. Does a Hindu understand the Vedas? Russians do not understand Old Church Slavonic. Neither do Poles and Czechs understand Latin. In the same way, the language of magic spells and incantations does not wish to be judged in terms of everyday common sense.⁵⁹

The magical power of incantation is believed to control spirits by naming their substance. On this level, the whole poem could also be read as a rigorous search for a

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 144-145. More specifically, Nilsson has the Symbolist poets in mind: “Around 1910 the tenets of the symbolist movement were challenged by groups and individual poets within and outside the movement itself.” Ibid., p. 140.

⁵⁸ Velimir Khlebnikov, “On Poetry”. In: *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov. Letters and Theoretical Writings*, p. 370.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 370.

name, an attempt to take hold of the very concept “laughter” by means of a paradigmatic run through all its possible formal and semantic facets.

The root morpheme “laugh” clearly constitutes the theme of the poem. As a result, it comes close to the Cubo-Futurists ideal of one-word poetry, as propagated in the manifesto “The Word as Such”:

Henceforth a work of art could consist of a single word, and simply by skilful alteration of that word the fullness and expressivity of artistic form might be attained.⁶⁰

The “word as such” is indeed the true subject of the poem. “A work of art is the art of the word“, Khlebnikov writes, and “Incantation by laughter” is above all a poetic reflection on the word itself: on its laws of formation, internal structure and mechanism of construction and on its semantic potential in new morphological combinations.⁶¹ Khlebnikov analyses and plays with the subject of morphology and self-reflectively exposes the very process of meaning construction: the device of word formation is laid bare and the very *modus operandus* of the production of meaning within the linguistic system is exposed, anticipating as well as epitomising the Formalists’ tenet of baring the device.

The dissection of words into morphemic units and their re-organisation into new conceptual entities conspicuously exposes the combination-based nature of language: language is essentially a combinatory game, within which a limited number of basic building blocks can be combined according to a limited number of rigid linguistic parameters, which define the boundaries within which combinations are legal and meaningful. Khlebnikov’s coinages demonstrate the possibility of a refinement of existing language, they point to the infinite semantic possibilities and undreamed-of minuscule nuances which would become possible if a more creative and flexible fusion of elementary linguistic units were allowed. Khlebnikov perceives himself as

⁶⁰ Velimir Khlebnikov, “The Word as Such”. In: Velimir Khlebnikov, *The king of time: selected writings of the Russian futurian*. Edited by Charlotte Douglas. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 119. The concrete poets develop this notion of the self-sufficient word further and arrive at “real” one-word poems in the fifties and sixties, for example Eugen Gomringer’s “Silencio”.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 119.

an engineer, as a “word-worker” who establishes transmitters from the meaning of one word to the other:

Word creation is the blowing up of linguistic silence, the deaf-and-dumb layers of language. By replacing one sound in an old word with another, we immediately create a path from one linguistic valley to another, and like engineers in the land of language, we cut paths of communication through mountains of linguistic silence.⁶²

Khlebnikov, in contrast to some other avant-garde poets, does not abandon meaning in this poem, but substantially refines it: his neologisms are “nearly always semantically motivated.”⁶³ The coinages, as Cooke put it, “do not destroy meaning, but enhance it.”⁶⁴ Moreover, in “Incantation by laughter”, the neologisms are embedded within proper syntactic structures and paired with existing words. Syntax here, in contrast to the works of the Italians, remains intact.

Nevertheless, the order of signs is dismantled here as well, even if this is done with the intent not to destroy but to improve language’s expressive capacities, similar to Marinetti’s endeavours in this respect. By means of not accepting existing structures as given, and by self-consciously exposing the very mechanisms of the system, Khlebnikov directs the attention to automatised conventions and forces the reader to reconsider them. Richard Vroon interprets this issue:

The moment a poet begins to violate the laws of language, he begins to make statements about the language. Each violation is a commentary on the law it eludes. If Xlebnikov had restricted his coinages to those based on productive models, we might be beguiled or amused, but we would not be forced to change our attitude toward the canonical structure we employ every day. When we encounter not only coinages built on non-productive models, but those that violate the morphological laws of the language, we are obliged to suspend our disbelief and rethink our assumptions about the patterns that are violated and the very validity of the canons of usage.⁶⁵

⁶² Velimir Khlebnikov, “Our Fundamentals”, pp. 376 – 377.

⁶³ Quoted from Raymond Cooke, *Velimir Khlebnikov. A critical study*, p. 20.

However, in other poetic experiments, most notably the *zaim* and the “language of the god” texts, concrete semantic meaning is abandoned.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶⁵ Ronald Vroon, *Velimir Khlebnikov's shorter poems. A key to the coinages*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1983, p. 7.

Moreover, within Khlebnikov's wider theoretical framework, the activity of word formation is a highly utopian endeavour, aiming not only at an enhancement of the current means of communication, but in fact at an improvement of the human community as a whole.

4. HUGO BALL AND THE NOTION OF STAINED LANGUAGE

4.1 Culture in Crisis

An irrational age, the German Dadaist Hugo Ball maintains, will beget irrational art. Ball was utterly and deeply disenchanted with his age, which was not only shaken to its foundations by changes in science, technology and philosophical thought, but which saw the introduction of machine-assisted mass-slaughter, the deployment of gas and trench warfare techniques and a staggering number of human casualties in World War I. Humanist ideals and faith in reason and progress were profoundly shattered: “Die Ideale sind nur aufgesteckte Etikettchen. Bis in die Grundfeste ist alles ins Wanken geraten”, Ball proclaims in his diary.¹ In such overwhelmingly irrational and confusing times, maintains Ball, art too can no longer project notions of unity and stability, it cannot pretend to know all answers nor try to uplift or edify. Art, like the times from which it emerges, will be characterised by paradox and irrationality:

In einer Zeit wie der unsern, in der die Menschen täglich von den ungeheuerlichsten Dingen bestürmt werden, ohne sich über die Eindrücke Rechenschaft geben zu können, in solcher Zeit wird das ästhetische Produzieren zur Diät. Alle lebendige Kunst aber wird irrational, primitiv und komplexhaft sein, eine Geheimsprache führen und Dokumente nicht der Erbauung, sondern der Paradoxie hinterlassen.²

During World War I, Ball and Emmy Hennings emigrated from Germany to Zurich, which was a melting pot of diverse emigrant activities: poets, painters, musicians and political activists from all over Europe fled the turmoil of the war and took refuge in the cultural centre of neutral Switzerland. They launched the Cabaret Voltaire in the premises of the “Holländische Meierei” on February 5 in 1916. The Cabaret became the birthplace of Dada, and the platform for an as yet unknown method of artistic and cultural activism: “Unser Kabarett ist eine Geste”, Ball writes in his diary.³ “Die

¹ Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*. Zurich: Limmat Verlag, 1992, p. 21.

² Ibid., pp. 74-75.

³ Ibid., p. 92.

Bildungs- und Kunstideale als Variétéprogramm –: das ist unsere Art von ‘Candide’ gegen die Zeit.”⁴ He maintains:

Jedes Wort, das hier gesprochen und gesungen wird, besagt wenigstens das eine, daß es dieser erniedrigenden Zeit nicht gelungen ist, uns Respekt abzunötigen. Was wäre auch respektabel und imponierend an ihr? Ihre Kanonen? Unsere große Trommel übertönt sie. Ihr Idealismus? Er ist längst zum Gelächter geworden, in seiner populären und seiner akademischen Ausgabe. Die grandiosen Schlachtfeste und kannibalischen Heldentaten? Unsere freiwillige Torheit, unsere Begeisterung für die Illusion wird sie zuschanden machen.⁵

The Cabaret is a dionysian howl against the bankruptcy of ideas, the death of idealism and the atrocities of the war, which irreparably damaged the belief in a positive development of history and humanity. Notions of epistemological uncertainty, relativism and perspectivism dominate philosophical discourses. Ball is specifically drawn to the thoughts of Nietzsche, in particular to his notion of the artist as cultural and social reformer who has to obliterate the old in order to create something new.⁶ According to Nietzsche, the destruction of existing values is the necessary prelude for all growth and cultural progress:

Siehe die Guten und Gerechten! Wen hassen sie am meisten? Den, der zerbricht ihre Tafeln der Werthe, den Brecher, den Verbrecher: – das aber ist der Schaffende.⁷

Nietzsche’s creator is always a destroyer first; the old tablets of values need to be broken before the new ones can be inscribed. Ball, it seems, took to heart this Zarathustrian premise quite literally: in place of the old value-tablets, it is language which he breaks and shatters, language being an equally powerful symbol for tradition, consensus and deep-rooted old orders. Ball’s proximity to Nietzschean thought is also evident in his lecture on Kandinsky held in the Galerie Dada, in which

⁴ Ibid., p. 101.

⁵ Ibid., p. 92.

⁶ Ball had begun to write his doctoral thesis on Nietzsche while he was studying philosophy in Munich and Heidelberg, but never finished it. He declares in a letter: “*L’art pour l’art* ist eine ästhetische Monomanie. Der Künstler muß die Idee haben, die Welt zu erlösen durch Rausch und Brand, oder er ist sinnlos.” Quoted from Phillip Mann, *Hugo Ball. An Intellectual Biography*. London: Bithell Series of Dissertations, 1987, p. 18.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1968, p. 20.

he laments the disintegration of all cultural foundations and convictions, the transvaluation of values and the loss of perspectives in the moral world.⁸

The bankruptcy of ideas, the breakdown of the system of beliefs and values, loss of faith in reason as well as the side-effects of mass-culture and growing mechanisation, Ball proclaims, have shattered all humanist ideals – and no existing artistic technique can cope with this demise: “Da keinerlei Kunst, Politik oder Bekenntnis diesem Dammbruch gewachsen scheinen, bleibt nur die Blague und die blutige Pose.”⁹ The Dadaists try to cope artistically with the fact that “die Welt der Systeme in Trümmer ging, und daß die auf Barzahlung drängende Zeit einen Ramschverkauf der entgötterten Philosophie eröffnet hat.”¹⁰

However, it is neither farce nor travesty which will emerge as the most significant artistic means of dealing with this phenomenon, but something else. “Die grellsten Pamphlete reichten nicht hin, die allgemein herrschende Hypokrisie gebührend mit Lauge und Hohn zu begießen”, writes Ball, and touches upon the very essence of the problem: a critique as essential, radical and profound as required by these circumstances, one which penetrates into the very foundations of culture, can no longer be expressed with the existing means of communication.¹¹ Within the parameters of existing language, this most fundamental disapproval can neither be articulated nor conveyed. A more radical strategy is required. Art for Ball was never “art for art’s sake”, but a device, a vehicle for the transportation of a criticism of the times:

Man kann wohl sagen, daß uns die Kunst nicht Selbstzweck ist – dazu bedürfte es einer mehr ungebrochenen Naivität –, aber sie ist uns eine Gelegenheit zur Zeitkritik und zum wahrhaften Zeitempfinden, Dinge, die doch Voraussetzung eines belangvollen, eines typischen Stiles sind.¹²

The Dadaist’s assault on artistic conventions and linguistic laws was not so much for the sake of art, but in fact for the sake of culture. Art is both method and tool.

⁸ Cf. Hugo Ball, *Flight out of time: a Dada diary*. New York: Viking Press, 1974, p. 223 f.

⁹ Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 99.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 101.

¹² Ibid., pp. 88-89.

4.2 Cabaret, Internationalism and Intermediality

Allen C. Greenberg has drawn attention to the essentially utopian nature of the Dadaists' activities: above all, he argues, they were concerned with changing the basic value and human substructure of society, and committed themselves to its transformation. Subject and society were to be altered via art. For this very reason, Greenberg asserts, the Dadaists naturally turned to the cabaret as the most effective vehicle for the transportation of their political, social and cultural criticism, for the cabaret allows for one of the most direct forms of interaction between audience and artists, which is a precondition for effective communication. Immediate impact, Greenberg argues, was more important to them than long-lasting artistic products:

They certainly were more interested in process than in product. They wanted to affect their audiences and bring about change in people rather than leave something for scholars to analyse and muse over. Dada exhibits, evenings and presentations were intended to have a public impact. Provocation was a goal, and that goal was, in fact, to influence people in the audience to rethink their positions on public issues.¹³

The cabaret is a public rather than a private art form, and its focus is on performance and the interaction of artists with the audience. There is a sense of immediacy of impact and of being up-to-date, and it invites audience responses. Thus, Greenberg maintains, it appeared to be the perfect medium to relate theory to practice and to bridge the gap between artist and public.¹⁴ Lisa Appignanesi writes:

The Cabaret Voltaire performance was one marked by audience provocation and protest. Surprise or shock tactics, the use of bruitistic elements, poetry or prose that was aggressively anti-logical, experiments with masks, costuming and dance which were radically anti-conventional – all these played a part in the Dadaists' unprogrammed attempt to liberate the imagination from the shackles of tradition.¹⁵

The Dadaists were essentially concerned with politics, Greenberg states, because “a concern with values is, in fact, a concern with politics or with man as political

¹³ Allan C. Greenberg, “The Dadaists and The Cabaret as Form and Forum”. In: Stephen C. Foster (ed.), *Dada/Dimensions*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985, p. 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁵ Lisa Appignanesi, *The Cabaret*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2004, p. 111.

animal.”¹⁶ There is indeed a decidedly political side to the Dadaists’ international stance: the Cabaret is both an eclectic synthesis of a vast plurality of artistic schools and media and a podium for international co-operation for people of the nations that were at war with each other. The anthology of the same name as the Cabaret, *Cabaret Voltaire*, Ball claims, was “die erste Synthese der modernen Kunst- und Literaturreichtungen”, comprising contributions by Expressionists, Futurists, and Cubists among others.¹⁷ Ball wrote an editorial note accompanying the anthology, in which he explicitly rejected a national interpretation of this collection and emphasised its international approach:

Um einer nationalen Interpretation dieser Sammlung vorzubeugen, erklärt der Herausgeber ausdrücklich, dass er sich dagegen verwahrt, zur “deutschen Mentalität” gerechnet zu werden.

Die Sammlung “Cabaret Voltaire” besteht aus Beiträgen von Franzosen (G. Apollinaire, B. Cendrars), Italienern (F. Canguillo, F.T. Marinetti, L. Modigliani), Spaniern (P. Picasso), Rumänen (M. Janco. Tr. Tzara), Holländern (O. van Rees), Österreichern (Max Oppenheimer), Polen (M. Slodki), Russen (W. Kandinsky) und Heimatlosen (Emmy Hennings).¹⁸

“Es soll ein internationales Cabaret werden”, Ball declares in his introduction to the anthology, an objective which is further underscored by the fact that the contributions to the anthology are in German, English, French and Italian.¹⁹ Hubert van den Berg rightly draws attention to the political significance of this international stance: “In einem geistigen Klima, das europaweit durch Nationalismen und Chauvinismen vergiftet war, ist diese Internationalität nicht zu unterschätzen.”²⁰ Poetically, the appeal for the reconciliation of nations at war with each other is perhaps best expressed by Tristan Tzara’s, Richard Huelsenbeck’s and Marcel Janco’s *poème simultan* “L’amiral cherche une maison à louer”, which functions only by a careful co-ordination of the English, the German and the French voice, by mutual listening and reacting to the others’ rhythm and speed.

¹⁶ Allan C. Greenberg, “The Dadaists and The Cabaret as Form and Forum”, p. 28.

¹⁷ Hugo Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 98.

¹⁸ Hugo Ball, “Cabaret Voltaire. Eine Sammlung Künstlerischer und Literarischer Beiträge”. Reprinted in: Michel Giroud (ed), *Dada*. Paris: Éditions Jean Michel Place, 1981, p. 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²⁰ Hubert van den Berg, *Avantgarde und Anarchismus. Dada in Zürich und Berlin*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999, p. 164.

The Cabaret's objective, however, was not only to bridge the gap between audience and performer and to propagate a deliberately international position, but also to bring about the fusion of the arts: the Dadaists' endeavours were not only interactive and international, but also trans-disciplinary. Music, painting, dance, performance, sculpture, woodcuts and poetry were equally explored and mixed together at the *soirées*; paintings by Picasso, masks by Janco and woodcuts by Hans Arp hung on the walls, music by Reger, Debussy, Rachmaninoff, Liszt and Balalaika tunes were played, Rudolf von Laban's dance group performed and texts from Vassily Kandinsky, Else Lasker-Schüler, Franz Wedekind, Blaise Cendrars, Christian Morgenstern, Erich Mühsam, Max Jacob, Lautréamont and Alfred Jarry amongst others were recited. "Europa malt, musiziert und dichtet in einer neuen Weise", observes Ball, and proclaims the "Zusammenschluß aller regenerativen Ideen, nicht nur der Kunst."²¹

Remarkably, just as Apollinaire and Khlebnikov had before him, it is in the sphere of the fine arts where Ball detects the first materialisation of the "visionary advent" and the emergence of radically new artistic and philosophical impulses:²²

Bilder um 1913. In der Malerei mehr als in jeder anderen Kunst sprach sich ein neues Leben aus. Ein visionärer Advent war hier ausgebrochen. [...] Der Intellekt als eine verrückte Welt war ausgeschaltet. [...] Es konnte den Anschein haben, als sei die Philosophie an die Künstler übergegangen; als gingen von ihnen die neuen Impulse aus. Als seien sie die Propheten der Wiedergeburt. Wenn wir Kandinsky und Picasso sagten, meinten wir nicht Maler, sondern Priester; nicht Handwerker, sondern Schöpfer neuer Welten, neuer Paradiese.²³

Ball was particularly inspired by Kandinsky's concept of "inner necessity", as outlined in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* from 1911. Kandinsky was the first to divorce painting entirely from elements of representation and reference in a watercolour painted in 1910. He wanted painting to focus on the specificities of the

²¹ Hugo Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 18.

²² In a little note below the simultaneous poem "L'amiral cherche une maison à louer" entitled "Note pour les Bourgeois", Tzara too indicates the importance of the quest of the painters. He defines the explorations of the Cubists as direct stimuli for the Dada poets, who attempted to transfer the new principles into the realm of literature and to experiment with the concept of simultaneity: "Les essais sur la transmutation des objet et des couleurs des premiers peintres cubistes (1907) Picasso, Braque, Duchamp-Villon, Delaunay, suscitaient l'envie d'appliquer en poésie les mêmes principes simultanés." Tristan Tzara, "Note pour les Bourgeois". In: Michel Giroud (ed), *Dada*, p. 22.

²³ Hugo Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, pp. 13-16.

medium, and to abandon its referential and descriptive tasks. It should become non-material and abstract, like music, aspiring to a metaphysical art which transcends matter and the objective world, answering to issues of inner necessity and aesthetic compositional considerations only:

In allem Erwähnten sind die Keime des Strebens zum Nichtnaturellen, Abstrakten und zu *innerer Natur*. [...] Bewußt oder unbewußt wenden sich allmählich die Künstler hauptsächlich zu ihrem Material, prüfen dasselbe, legen auf die geistige Waage den inneren Wert der Elemente, aus welchem zu schaffen ihre Kunst geeignet ist.²⁴

Moreover, Kandinsky too was not only concerned with art, but with the enhancement of society: art for him was a portrayal of spiritual values, which drew upon contemporary spiritual and intellectual life. The internal properties of all arts, as externally different as they may appear, serve the same purpose, that of moving and refining the human soul. Kandinsky perceived of society and its spiritual life as a gradually forward and upward moving triangle, in which artists, far ahead of their times and their contemporaries, fulfil the task of leading the rest of society forward, by means of transgressing established artistic and cultural positions:

Das ganze Dreieck bewegt sich langsam, kaum sichtbar nach vor- und aufwärts, und wo "heute" die höchste Spitze war, ist "morgen" die nächste Abteilung, d. h. was heute nur der obersten Spitze verständlich ist, was dem ganzen übrigen Dreieck eine unverständliche Fäselei ist, wird morgen zum sinn- und gefühlvollen Inhalt des Lebens der zweiten Abteilung.²⁵

Ball was aware of the socio-political impetus in Kandinsky's theoretical framework: "Was ihn beschäftigte, war die Wiedergeburt der Gesellschaft aus der Vereinigung aller artistischen Mittel und Mächte."²⁶ Like Kandinsky, he too was not merely interested in aesthetics:

Die Theorien, Kandinskys z.B., immer auf den Menschen, auf die Person anwenden, und sich nicht in die Ästhetik abdrängen lassen. Um den Menschen geht es, nicht um die Kunst. Wenigstens nicht in erster Linie um die Kunst.²⁷

²⁴ Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. Edited by Max Bill. Bern-Bümpliz: Benteli-Verlag, 1959, p. 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁶ Hugo Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Ball, like Khlebnikov, aspires to “follow boldly after painting”: he draws explicit parallels between the phenomenon of abstraction in the fine arts and his own attempts to renounce words in his poetry, arguing that the faces of humans have become so despicable that they have been abandoned entirely from art, and that poetry is on the verge of doing the same with language:

Daß das Bild des Menschen in der Malerei dieser Zeit mehr und mehr verschwindet und alle Dinge nur noch in der Zersetzung vorhanden sind, das ist ein Beweis mehr, wie häßlich und abgegriffen das menschliche Antlitz, und wie verabscheuenswert jeder einzelne Gegenstand unserer Umgebung geworden ist. Der Entschluß der Poesie, aus ähnlichen Gründen die Sprache fallen zu lassen, steht nahe bevor.²⁸

4.3 Verses without Words: The Withdrawal into the Innermost Alchemy of Language

On 23 June 1916, Ball recited “Karawane” and the five other poems of the cycle “gadji beri bimba”, the “Verse ohne Worte”, in the Cabaret, claiming in his diary: “Ich habe eine neue Gattung von Versen erfunden, ‘Verse ohne Worte’ oder Lautgedichte [...]”²⁹ However, Ball was by no means the first to deploy non- or only partly referential sounds in poetry, as Michael Lentz has pointed out. The first sound poem was Paul Scheerbart’s “Kikakdu! Eloralops!” written in 1897, followed by Christian Morgenstern’s “Der Grosse Lalula”.³⁰ Ball was also familiar with the “bruitist” experiments of the Italian Futurists, and their *parole in libertà*, since he published some of these works in the *Cabaret Voltaire* anthology. Moreover, he could also have learned about the *zaum*-explorations of the Russian Cubo-Futurists by way of Kandinsky.

“Das ‘Poème simultan’ handelt vom Wert der Stimme”, Ball writes, and identifies the public recital as the touchstone for the quality of his poetry:

Nirgends so sehr als beim öffentlichen Vortrag ergeben sich die Schwächen einer Dichtung. [...] Das laute Rezitieren ist mir zum Prüfstein der Güte eines Gedichtes geworden, und ich habe mich (vom Podium) belehren

²⁸ Ibid., p. 84.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 105.

³⁰ Cf. Michael Lentz, *Lautpoesie/musik nach 1945. Eine kritisch-dokumentarische Bestandsaufnahme*, vol. 1. Vienna: Edition Selene, 2000, p. 98.

lassen, in welchem Ausmaße die heutige Literatur problematisch, das heißt am Schreibtische erklügelt und für die Brille des Sammlers, statt für die Ohren lebendiger Menschen gefertigt ist.³¹



Hugo Ball in his Magic Bishop Costume at the Cabaret Voltaire, 1916

On 23 June, however, Ball not only read but artfully staged his poems: in a truly intermedial spirit, he paired his poetry with performance elements. In his diary, Ball gives an explicit account of his appearance in the “magic bishop” cubist cardboard costume, the wing-like movements of his arms, the light effects and particularly the priestly chanting of the vowel sequences, which all added theatrical dimensions to his recital.³²

³¹ Hugo Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 83.

³² Ball writes: “Die ersten dieser Verse habe ich heute abend vorgelesen. Ich hatte mir dazu ein eigenes Kostüm konstruiert. Meine Beine standen in einem Säulenrund aus blauglänzendem Karton, der mir schlank bis zur Hüfte reichte, so daß ich bis dahin wie ein Obelisk aussah. Darüber trug ich einen riesigen, aus Pappe geschnittenen Mantelkragen, der innen mit Scharlach und außen mit Gold beklebt, am Halse derart zusammengehalten war, daß ich ihn durch Heben und senken der Ellbogen flügelartig bewegen konnte. Dazu einen zylinderartigen, hohen, weiß und blau gestreiften Schamanenhut. [...] Ich hatte jetzt rechts am Notenständer ‘Labadas Gesang an die Wolken’ und links die ‘Elefantenkarawane’ absolviert und wandte mich wieder zur mittleren Staffelei, fleißig mit den Flügeln schlagend. Die schweren Vokalreihen und der schleppende Rhythmus der Elefanten hatten

Prior to the performance, Ball read out a manifesto-like statement, in which he stated his reasons for renouncing the use of referential language. Language, Ball argues, has been utterly stained and corrupted by journalism and its usage has thus become intolerable:

Man verzichte mit dieser Art Klanggedichte in Bausch und Bogen auf die durch den Journalismus verdorbene und unmöglich gewordenen Sprache. Man ziehe sich in die innerste Alchimie des Wortes zurück, man gebe auch das Wort noch preis, und bewahre so der Dichtung ihren letzten heiligsten Bezirk.³³

The demand to withdraw to the “innermost alchemy” of the word in order to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge is an explicit call for the abandonment of the representational dimension of language and the exploration of its material qualities in times of cultural crisis. Language has been instrumentalised in the propaganda machinery, from which it emerged spoiled and tainted, Ball suggests. Language too is a ritual of a society which has become abhorrent in all its manifestations. Language is a social practice, and has been contaminated and infected by those who abuse it. In Ball’s poems, references to a world extrinsic to the language system are blurred and rendered ambiguous, partly even abandoned, for the sake of a retreat into the intricate and autonomous interplay of its sounds. This strategy, Ball argues, is necessitated by the specific circumstances of the times:

Was uns bei unseren Bemühungen zustatten kam, waren zunächst die besonderen Umstände dieser Zeit, die eine Begabung von Rang weder ruhen noch reifen läßt und sie somit auf die Prüfung der Mittel verweist.³⁴

mir eben noch eine letzte Steigerung erlaubt. Wie sollte ich’s aber zu Ende führen? Da bemerkte ich, daß meine Stimme, der kein anderer Weg mehr blieb, die uralte Kadenz der priesterlichen Lamentation annahm, jenen Stil des Meßgesangs, wie er durch die katholischen Kirchen des Morgen- und Abendlandes wehklagt.

Ich weiß nicht, was mir diese Musik eingab. Aber ich begann meine Vokalreihen rezitativartig im Kirchenstile zu singen und versuchte es, nicht nur ernst zu bleiben, sondern mir auch den Ernst zu erzwingen. Einen Moment lang schien mir, als tauche in meiner kubistischen Maske ein bleiches, verstörtes Jungensgesicht auf, jenes halb erschrockene, halb neugierige Gesicht eines zehnjährigen Knaben, der in den Totenmessen und Hochämtern seiner Heimatspfarrei zitternd und gierig am Munde der Priester hängt. Da erlosch, wie ich es bestellt hatte, das elektrische Licht, und ich wurde vom Podium herab schweißbedeckt als ein magischer Bischof in die Versenkung getragen.” Ibid., pp. 105-106.

³³ Ibid., p. 106.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 101.

Ball considers his eradication of unambiguously referential words from poetry as a modality of the same process which can be witnessed in the fine arts, where concrete faces and objects disappear from canvases, because everything tangible and reminiscent of reality has become utterly despicable to the painters.³⁵ Moreover, he perceives language as second-hand material, as consisting of ready-made building blocks which are never quite adequate for specific and individual purposes:

Man verzichte darauf, aus zweiter Hand zu dichten: nämlich Worte zu übernehmen (von Sätzen ganz zu schweigen), die man nicht funkelnagelneu für den eigenen Gebrauch erfunden habe.³⁶

Ball aspires to deploy only words which he himself has invented in an effort to abstain from using existing language. He envisages an anarchic language, personal individualised vocabulary, corresponding to his own moods and perceptions – ideas which run entirely counter to the principle of functional communication, which depends on conventionalised meanings and adherence to the linguistic contract.

Ich lese Verse, die nicht weniger vorhaben als: auf die Sprache zu verzichten. [...] Ich will keine Worte, die andere erfunden haben. Alle Worte haben andere erfunden. Ich will meinen eigenen Unfug, und Vokale und Konsonanten dazu, die ihm entsprechen. Wenn eine Schwingung sieben Ellen lang ist, will ich füglich Worte dazu, die sieben Ellen lang sind. Die Worte des Herrn Schulze haben nur zwei ein halb Zentimeter.³⁷

The poem “Karawane” is exemplary both for the withdrawal into the intricate alchemy of sounds, and for the invention of a new private vocabulary, although Ball did not at all consequently abandon all existing words from his poetic repertory. In the 1920 edition, “Karawane” is set in eighteen different typefaces, each line, including the title, in a different one, some bold, some in italics.³⁸ Thus the

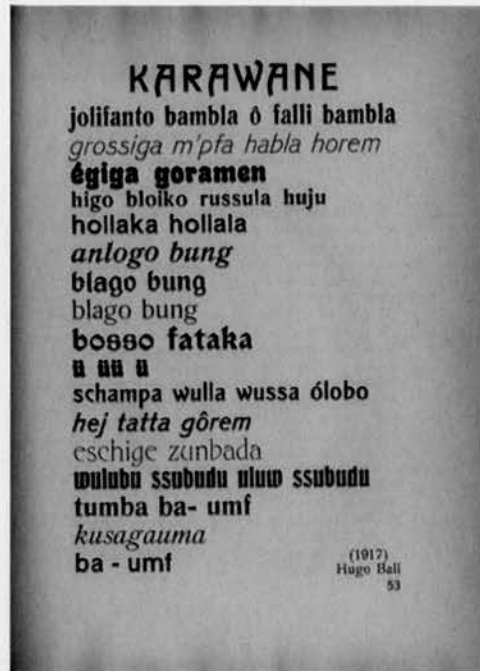
³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 84. Enno Stahl too points out: “Die Inhalte der Kunst sollten gänzlich neutralisiert, vom Subjektiven befreit werden, um einen unmittelbaren Ausdruck des bloßen Sprach- bzw. Farb-Materials zu gewährleisten. Das heißt, man strebte die völlige Aufhebung des Mimesis-Prinzips an und inszenierte damit den Bruch mit zweitausend Jahren Kunstgeschichte.” Enno Stahl, *Anti-Kunst und Abstraktion in der literarischen Moderne (1909-1933)*, p. 16.

³⁶ Hugo Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 106.

³⁷ Hugo Ball, “Eröffnungs-Manifest, 1. Dada-Abend. Zuerich, 14. Juli 1916”. In: Klaus Riha and Joergen Schaefer (ed.), *DADA total. Manifeste, Aktionen, Texte, Bilder*. Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam Junior, 1994, p. 34.

³⁸ However, as Christian Scholz has pointed out, the typographically enhanced version was never authorised by Ball: “Die verschiedenen schriftlichen Fassungen dieses Lautgedichts wurden vom Autor nur im Falle der mit Schreibmaschine geschriebenen Version, die in den von Annemarie Ball-

importance of the visual aspect of the sign, the graphical, perceivable dimension of language, is emphasised in addition to the acoustic dimension.³⁹



Hugo Ball, "Karawane", 1916

The title of the poem, which Ball also refers to as "Elephantenkarawane" in *Flucht aus der Zeit*, is the only signifier which unambiguously denotes a phenomenon of the external world. It thus decisively channels and directs the interpretation of the following seventeen lines. The sound-clusters of the poem fulfil the formal criteria of words, namely a space on either side but none within. Single isolated letters occur only in lines 1 ("ô") and 10 ("ü üü ü"). In the title already, an important structural

Hennings aus den Manuskripten editierten 'Gesammeltem Gedichten' enthalten ist, autorisiert, während eine Autorisation für die zwei typographische ausgearbeiteten Fassungen für den geplanten DADA-Almanach des Kurt Wolff Verlages und für den 1920 erschienenen, von Richard Huelsenbeck herausgegebenen 'DADA ALMANACH' des Erich Reiss Verlages nicht vorlag." Christian Scholz, "Bezüge zwischen 'Lautpoesie' und 'visueller Poesie'. Vom 'optophonetischen Gedicht' zum 'Multimedia-Text' – ein historischer Abriss" In: *VISUELLE POESIE. TEXT + KRITIK. Zeitschrift für Literatur. SONDERBAND*, 1997, p. 117.

³⁹ Erdmute Wenzel White writes that the poem was actually first printed in the *Dadaco: Dadaistischer Handatlas*, which was slated for release in January 1920 but was then abandoned due to differences between Heartfield and the publisher and remained unpublished. On page 10 of the retrieved reproduction proofs, "Karawane" appeared together with a picture of Ball in his magic bishop costume. Moreover, fragments of the poem were scattered throughout the *Handatlas*, transforming it into material which could be assembled into new compositional structures. Cf. Erdmute Wenzel White, *The Magic Bishop. Hugo Ball – Dada Poet*. Columbia: Camden House, 1998, p. 112; 119.

principle is introduced: the repetition of vowels, of slow, long ones in particular. The vowels a, o and u, all of them lengthy and rather dark in tone, dominate; “i” appears seven times and “e” only five times. The overall impression is that of euphony, a pleasing smoothness of sound, due to the domination of languidly drawling back-vowels and of voiceless, lateral and nasal consonants. Harsher consonants, like plosives and fricatives, are in the minority. Sounds are clearly the themes of the poem, dominating and structuring the verses by means of alliteration, interior rhyme and repetition. They are woven into an autonomous construct which answers the demands of inner necessity alone. There is no regular rhyme scheme or coherent metre, but according to Ball, “der schleppende Rhythmus der Elefanten”, which runs through the poem.⁴⁰

The first cluster is a portmanteau word, containing the French “joli”, beautiful, and “éléphanteau”. The opening line appears rather timid, supported by the “i”-sounds, which underscore the notion of a baby-elephant. In line 2 something gigantic seems to emerge, perhaps a big elephant, an association evoked by “Groß” and “giga”; “m’pfa” suggests, by means of onomatopoeia, a dull, heavy stomping. “Giga” and the notion of something big run through the next line also; “goramen” contains men, perhaps indicating the herdsmen accompanying the elephant caravan. The calls “hollaka hollala” might be attributed to them, as Erdmute Wenzel White has pointed out.⁴¹ “Hollaka” and “hollala” are distinguished by only one letter, similar to the subtle changes in the clusters of line 13, “wulubu ssubudu uluwu ssubudu”, which indicate a very delicate, precise work on the material. Minimal variations result in changes of effect and tone. Single sounds are the leitmotifs, the themes of the lines, wandering forth in different variations into the subsequent lines.

“Russula” in line 4 is reminiscent of “Rüssel”, or “trunk”, and “higo” may be an inscription of Ball’s first name, as Rex W. Last has suggested.⁴² “Anlogo” in line 6 evokes “unlogisch”, “not logical”. It might be read as a self-reflective comment, like Apollinaire’s “ça a l’air de rimer”, ironically thematising the absence of logic and coherence. “Blago bung/ blago bung” is an onomatopoetic imitation of the sounds of stomping elephant feet. Again, it might be an incomplete anagram of Hugo Ball at

⁴⁰ Hugo Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, pp. 105-106.

⁴¹ Erdmute Wenzel White, *The Magic Bishop. Hugo Ball – Dada Poet*, p. 111 f.

⁴² Rex W. Last, *German Dadaist Literature*. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1973, p. 95.

the same time. Alliterations and subtle variations of sounds weave through the entire poem. All words seem to drawl lazily, due to the lengthening vowels, as one would expect elephants to move. The words pass slowly, like a cumbersome caravan, as Last has suggested.⁴³

“Fataka” in line 9 is the first faster syllable sequence, introducing the “ü üü ü” theme, which appears to be a climax, a turning point in the middle of the poem, and might suggest the sound that elephants utter through their trunks when being excited. After line 10, the vowels get shorter, the impression of movement is evoked, the poem gets livelier and more diversified. The “u” motif in line 14, “wulubu ssubudu wulubu ssubudu” is particularly apparent, and the line has the air of a magical formula or a chanted incantation. The final “ba-umf” is like a last sound of the caravan vanishing in the distance.

“Karawane” is marked by a juxtaposition of fragments from a conglomeration of conventional languages, for instance “jolifanto”, which draws upon French, and “men” of “goramen” upon English, onomatopoeias such as “ba-umf” and “bung”, and abstract sound clusters like “ssubudu”. While “habla”, Spanish for he, she or it speaks, and “horem” seem to derive from or imitate the Latin languages, “wulubu ssubudu uluwu ssubudu” is reminiscent of African dialects, as Wenzel White has pointed out.⁴⁴

Caravans, the elephant theme, the analogies of some sounds to African tongues and particularly the rhythm all fit into the context of the preoccupation with “primitivism” and a fascination with African and Oceanic aesthetics that was pertinent in the artistic discourse around that time. Africa and the South Sea Islands, places which had not yet been corrupted by the horrors of industrialisation, mass culture and estrangement from nature, must have seemed like a paradisiacal other world, epitomising all that was lost in war-ridden and troubled times. The preoccupation with “primitivism” might have been a reaction to the growing and overwhelming complexities of the age, a desire to go back to origins, nature, to pure archaic forms, primordial rituals and rhythms. The “African fever” was fuelled

⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 95 ff.

⁴⁴ Apparently Jan Ephraim, the owner of the Meierei, the location of the *Cabaret Voltaire*, served as a linguistic advisor, since he had travelled frequently in Africa. Cf. Erdmute Wenzel White, *The Magic Bishop*, p. 112.

further by Carl Einstein's monograph about "Negro" plastics, which appeared in 1915, and an increasing interest in ethnological findings. It is manifest in numerous artworks, most famously in Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger" (O.J. 1965), and in Janco's masks, Tzara's "Chants nègres" and Huelsenbeck's affinity for drums, rhythm and ritual.

In "Karawane", Ball abandons the task of unambiguously denoting phenomena from the external world. He aims at evoking and touching upon concepts, alluding to them rather than clearly signifying them:

Wir suchten der isolierten Vokabel die Fülle einer Beschwörung, die Glut eines Gestirns zu verleihen. Und seltsam: die magisch erfüllte Vokabel beschwor und gebar einen *neuen* Satz, der von keinerlei konventionellem Sinn bedingt und gebunden war. An hundert Gedanken zugleich anstreifend, ohne sie namhaft zu machen, ließ dieser Satz das urtümlich spielende, aber versunkene, irrationale Wesen des Hörers erklingen; weckte und bestärkte er die untersten Schichten der Erinnerung. Unsere Versuche streiften Gebiete der Philosophie und des Lebens, von denen sich unsere ach so vernünftige, altkluge Umgebung kaum etwas träumen ließ.⁴⁵

Freed from conventionalised meaning and syntactical frameworks, by means of touching lightly upon hundreds of ideas at the same time, ambiguity and multiple meaning are exploited as sources of poetic richness. Ball's poem circumvents the rational faculties of the recipient in order to penetrate into the deepest strata of memory and to reawaken buried subconscious and irrational aspects. "Karawane" is a direct and immediate appeal to the senses, the imagination, memory and to the faculty of association, akin in this respect to Khlebnikov's concept of beyond-sense language. Ball aims at stirring up, evoking rather than denoting, paving the way for a myriad of possible associations.

Music, the most abstract of all arts, has the capacity to reach the recipient via non-intellectual means, by way of an immediate appeal to the senses. This direct and immediate communication, this uplifting of emotions by sound, seems to be manifest in "Karawane" too: its inner composition is governed by musical standards. Euphonious in nature, inner concision as structural principle, utilisation of leitmotifs, harmony and beauty of sound all contribute to a piece that oscillates on the

⁴⁵ Hugo Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 102.

boundaries of music and poetry. The major means of coherence is sound, and not semantics; the poem pays tribute to the phonetic substance of language.

Ball's sound poem is a wonderful example of the exploration of the material, the "Prüfung der Mittel", which is present in all avant-garde poetry: the acoustic dimension of the linguistic sign is emphasised at the cost of the unequivocal referential quality, the relatively free play of signifying material is given priority over the signifieds. "Wir haben die Plastizität des Wortes jetzt bis zu einem Punkte getrieben, an dem sie schwerlich mehr überboten werden kann", writes Ball:

Wir erreichten dies Resultat auf Kosten des logisch gebauten, verstandesmäßigen Satzes und demnach auch unter Verzicht auf ein dokumentarisches Werk (als welches nur mittels zeitraubender Gruppierung von Sätzen in einer logisch geordneten Syntax möglich ist).⁴⁶

Additionally, the visual shape of language and the impacts of typography are explored in the written version. Mediate representation is given up in favour of the immediate, sound combinations are now not symbols for something, but have gained autonomy from linguistic laws and an aesthetic validity of their own. Sound as evocative aesthetic material and means of coherence is now self-sufficient and is itself the subject-matter of the poem, just as lines, colours and forms have become autonomous in painting. Sound refers, at least in those sound-clusters not alluding to known words, to itself alone. The attention is drawn to the texture, formation and plasticity of language. Sound in all its facets, sound as carrier of meaning, sound as imitation of nature, sound as harmonious composition and sound as stimulus for associations, is explored.

4.4 Revolution in Poetic Language: Ball and Kristeva

Marinetti and his adherents, Ball acknowledges, freed words from the confinements of syntax. But the Dadaists were even bolder:

Mit der Preisgabe des Satzes dem Worte zuliebe begann resolut der Kreis um Marinetti mit den "Parole in libertà". Sie nahmen das Wort aus dem gedankenlos und automatisch ihm zuerteilten Satzrahmen (dem Weltbilde) heraus, nährten die ausgezehnte Großstadt vokabel mit Licht und Luft, gaben

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 101.

ihr Wärme, Bewegung und ihre ursprünglich unbekümmerte Freiheit wieder.
Wir anderen gingen noch einen Schritt weiter.⁴⁷

Ball seems to fathom the radical implications of the dissection of language on the level of syntax by the Italians, comparing the syntactical frame with the *Weltbild*. This might allude to Wilhelm von Humboldt's dictum of the "Weltansicht in der Sprache": Humboldt pointed out that language always already contains a view of the world, beliefs, value systems and an imprint of the speaker's mind.⁴⁸ But the Dadaists, Ball argues, have taken the dissection of the language system to yet another level, surpassing in radicality both the Futurists and Khlebnikov, by means of obliterating words and even morphemes from their textual operations.

The incentives for Ball's abandonment of the signifieds are manifold: doubts about the expressive and representative capacity of language certainly play a role. "Die Sprache ist nicht das einzige Ausdrucksmittel. Die tiefsten Erlebnisse vermag sie nicht mitzuteilen (zu beachten bei der Bewertung der Literatur).", Ball states.⁴⁹ But most importantly, referential language is dispensed with because it is considered to be stained and corrupted, infected by the times and the people who have abused it.

Ein Vers ist die Gelegenheit, möglichst ohne Worte und ohne die Sprache auszukommen. Diese vermaledeite Sprache, an der Schmutz klebt wie von Maklerhänden, die die Münzen abgegriffen haben.⁵⁰

Language is considered as a tainted ritual inextricably intertwined with a deeply despised society. Language and signs are not neutral carriers of meaning, but are themselves acutely infected by, and in fact part of, the intricate network of value structures, ideologies and other past and present forces which amount to the distinctive features of a historical moment. Ball fathomed and anticipated what was to be formulated theoretically only in the 1960s: signification itself is always part of, and, often involuntarily, helps to perpetuate and enforce the dominant power structures.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 102.

⁴⁸ Cf. Franz von Kutschera, *Philosophy of Language*. Dordrecht-Holland; Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1975, pp. 242-243.

⁴⁹ Hugo Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, pp. 112-113.

⁵⁰ Hugo Ball, "Eröffnungs-Manifest, 1. Dada-Abend. Zuerich, 14. Juli 1916", p. 34.

It is within the language system that the process of cultural decontamination must be initiated, Ball maintains: “Bei der Sprache muß die Läuterung beginnen, die Imagination muß gereinigt werden.”⁵¹ Referring to fine arts, but talking about a more general process, he writes: “Es geht vielleicht gar nicht um Kunst, sondern um das inkorrupte Bild.”⁵² This statement poignantly illustrates the main objective for Ball’s abandonment of the signified and exploration of the material properties of the signifier: this operation is not aesthetically motivated, but primarily an attempt to break free from the all-encompassing cultural corruption which has even ventured forth and permeated and infected the sign systems themselves, both in art and in literature.

Language as a social practice is what is at stake in Ball’s poems, and thus it is not just language which is shattered, but that which comes with it as well: “Die Sprache als soziales Organ kann zerstört sein, ohne daß der Gestaltungsprozess zu leiden braucht. Ja es scheint, daß die schöpferischen Kräfte sogar gewinnen.”⁵³ It is only by means of breaching predefined restrictions and limitations, be they linguistic or socio-political in nature, that Ball feels he can create and express his criticism of the times. It is the transgression and displacement of boundaries which is important here, those of socially established signifying practices, of linguistic and literary conventions, of that which is speakable and thus thinkable, and ultimately of the recipient and society.

In *La Révolution du Langage Poétique*, Julia Kristeva discusses a hitherto unknown signifying practice, which she observes in late 19th century poetry by Mallarmé and Lautréamont among others: the shattering of discourse, the pulverisation of language, the explosion of phonetic, lexicologic and syntactic laws. It is in literature of this kind, literature in which poets enter into the code of linguistic and social communication, in which signs are dissolved and the veil of representation is torn in order to bare the material signifying process, Kristeva argues, that the boundaries both of the subject and society can be burst open and transformed. What is at stake in such a signifying practice, according to Kristeva, is not just language: the explosion of phonetic, lexical and syntactic laws implies the bursting open of epistemological,

⁵¹ Hugo Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 112.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

psychological and ideological limitations of the subject and, by implication, society. Every social construct is questioned and under attack in these texts:

Cette pratique du procès n'a pas de destinataire; il n'y a pas de sujet, fût-il divisé, qui puisse l'entendre. Cette pratique ne s'adresse pas, elle emporte tout ce qui fait partie du même espace pratique: des "unités" humaines en procès.⁵⁴

Kristeva compares the dissection of language to a political revolution: "[le texte est] [u]ne pratique que l'on pourrait comparer à celle de la révolution politique: l'une opère pour le sujet ce que l'autre introduit dans la société."⁵⁵ Poetic language dissection and political revolution, she argues, are modalities of the same process, which differ only in their field of application: while revolutionary action aims at the radical transformation of social structures and initially leaves the forms of linguistic exchange undisturbed, it does produce a landslide which will change and affect signifying structures as well. Linguistic revolution functions the other way round: the social function of texts in which the semiotic order is assaulted is to "produire un sujet différent, susceptible d'induire de nouveaux rapports sociaux".⁵⁶

L'impérialisme produit son véritable fossoyeur dans l'homme non-assujetti, l'homme-procès qui embrase et déplace toutes les lois jusqu'à celles – et peut-être surtout celles – des structures signifiantes. Le procès producteur du texte fait donc partie non pas de telle société assise, mais de la transformation sociale inséparable de la transformation pulsionnelle et langagière.⁵⁷

The implications of a revolution in poetic language are thus, in theory, as drastic and radical as those of a revolution of social structures: what is at stake is not just linguistic order, but all social orders. Every social construct is questioned and under attack in texts of this kind. This signifying practice breaks up the totality of objects and investigates them with their own fragments, obliterating social and political signifieds from the discourse: they are dispensed with for the sake of the exploration and disturbance of the signifying process, as in Ball's poem.

⁵⁴ Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du Langage Poétique*, p. 96.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

The aesthetic, political and philosophical assumptions pertinent in “Karawane” are not tangible or concrete, they are not manifest on the content level, but are implied in the ways of treating the language material. By means of intervening into, shattering and exploding linguistic structures, the protest against the times, its values and rituals is both symbolised and effectuated on the terrain of the code itself, within the very structures that are problematised and under scrutiny.

5. THE DEATH OF REFERENCE OR THE MOST RADICAL CRITIQUE

5.1 Mirror and Tool: On the Double Function of Dadaist Art

“Wir erleben heute die ungeheuerste Revolution auf allen Gebieten des menschlichen Organisierens”, writes Raoul Hausmann, protagonist of Berlin Dada, in 1919. “Nicht nur die kapitalistische Wirtschaft, sondern auch alle Wahrheit, Ordnung, Recht, Moral, auch alles Männliche und Weibliche ist in Auflösung.”¹ The old order of the world is falling to pieces, Hausmann states, and paradoxically, Dada is both reflecting as well as driving forward and radicalising this tendency: it is both symptom and tool simultaneously, effect, consequence of, and reaction to tumultuous times as well as a vigorous strategy of cultural interventionism.²

Hausmann can be considered as the most radical poet in the sequence of language dissectors so far, for he is the first to abandon referentiality completely in his poster poems of 1918, shattering language into monadic and autonomous signs that no longer fuse into meaningful combinations and refer to nothing but themselves. Hausmann claims that art acts as a mirror, as a visual edification illustrating the true character of the times:

In dem ungeheuren Geschehen unserer Zeit, in dem alle alten feststehenden Werte relativ, unsicher wurden, musste vor allem auch die Kunst als lebendiger Anschauungsunterricht, den der Mensch sich gibt, um die Welt in sich und sich in der Welt zu erkennen, eine veränderte Stellung einnehmen.³

The assault both on established linguistic and pictorial orders can be considered as an attempt to artistically capture, articulate and come to terms with radical changes and the collapse of established values, principles and systems of ideas. The degree and boldness of the Dadaists’ artistic explorations are unprecedented: traditional notions

¹ Raoul Hausmann, “Zur Weltrevolution”. In: Raoul Hausmann, *Bilanz der Feierlichkeiten. Texte bis 1933*, vol. 1. Edited by Michael Erlhoff. Munich: edition text und kritik, 1982, p. 50.

² The question whether non-mimetic, non-organic art is the loudspeaker of an alienated consciousness or its critique, which Theodor W. Adorno poses in *Ästhetische Theorie*, seems to be resolved in the case of Dada, where both readings apply simultaneously. Adorno writes: “Nicht ist generell darüber zu urteilen, ob einer, der mit allem Ausdruck tabula rasa macht, Lautsprecher verdinglichten Bewußtseins ist oder der sprachlose, ausdruckslose Ausdruck, der jenes denunziert.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003, p. 179.

³ Raoul Hausmann, “Die Kunst und die Zeit”. In: Raoul Hausmann, *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen. Texte bis 1933*, vol. 2. Edited by Michael Erlhoff. Munich: edition text und kritik, 1982, p. 7.

of epistemological and sensual perception as well as pictorial and linguistic conventions are under scrutiny:

Wie wir allen gedanklichen, wissenschaftlichen, ökonomischen Besitz ins Wanken geraten sehen, so gerieten auch unsere Vorstellungen auf dem Gebiet der sinnlichen Erkenntnisfähigkeit und ihrer verschiedenen Ausdrucksformen wie Malerei, Plastik, Architektur und Musik ins Wanken; sie traten plötzlich in ein bisher nicht dagewesenes Stadium des Experimentierens, für das die Kunsthistoriker nur sehr schlechte Erklärungen vorbringen konnten [...].⁴

Hausmann describes avant-garde art as “gemalte oder modellierte Erkenntniskritik.”⁵ In addition to the cultural mirror-aspect pertinent within dadaist art, however, Hausmann also emphasises its revolutionary potential, and recognises it explicitly as cultural tool, as critical strategy, as a means not only to reflect, but to instigate and bring about change. Crucially, he compares the shattering of pictorial orders with a dissolution of political or legislative orders:

[...] man löste die bisherigen Bildeinheiten ebenso auf, wie man etwa versucht, eine alte Rechts- oder Staatsform aufzulösen. Diese Versuche entsprechen einer geistigen Form des Lebens, einer geforderten Wahrheit statt einer bloßen Anerkennung der gegebenen Wirklichkeit [...].⁶

The artistic manifestations of Dada do not just depict, acknowledge and reflect an existing reality, but actively call for a new order of things, a transformation of existing structures. Art, and literature, are thus functioning as models for the organisation of society: that which is effectuated and realised on the level of signs, namely a radical assault upon existing orders, hierarchies and conventions, has symbolic significance – it can be considered as *Modellversuch*, as a symbolic act of dissolution and reorganisation.

5.2 Political Criticism vs. “Semiotic Warfare”

In the course of the year 1918 in Berlin, the desired transformations of political and social structures seemed well underway and tangible. The times were tumultuous:

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶ Ibid., p. 10 f.

Germany was on the threshold between war and peace, Wilhelminian *Kaiserreich* and democratic republic, and saw the *Novemberrevolution*. The *Novemberrevolution* ignited a revolutionary spark that soon spread all over Germany and resulted in uprisings, strikes, mass demonstrations and the establishments of worker and soldier-councils, who took over municipal administrations and ultimately forced the abduction of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Revolution was in the air, and not just in the arts, as left-wing forces, amongst them the leaders of the *Spartakusbund* Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, aimed at the establishment of a soviet republic. Hausmann recalls:

Einige Monate später zwangen die militärischen Niederlagen und der Aufstand der Matrosen von Kiel die Generäle zum Waffenstillstand vom 11. November 1918. Das war die Revolution.
Schluß mit den Träumen einer imperialistischen allmächtigen deutschen Vorherrschaft.
Spartakus war auf allen Straßen, an allen Orten, und im erschütterten Berlin erregte sich DADA.⁷

However, hopes for a genuine restructuring of economic and social structures were soon crushed by the installment of the much more moderate SPD-led *Nationalversammlung*, and by the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

The times were highly politicised, and so were the Berlin Dadaists, much more explicitly so than the members in Zurich. Particularly George Grosz, John Heartfield and Wieland Herzfelde, the owner of the left-wing Malik Verlag, in which numerous Dada-journals were published, were actively engaged in the *Novemberrevolution* and the Spartakus-uprising.⁸ Their art too was much more decidedly designed as tool for the initiation of a communist revolution and the mobilisation of the proletarian masses. They were against what they called the merely aesthetic avant-garde,

⁷ Raoul Hausmann, "Dada empört sich, regt sich und stirbt in Berlin". In: Karl Riha (ed.), *Dada Berlin. Texte, Manifeste, Aktionen*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1977, p. 4.

⁸ Again, the Dadaists both in Zurich and Berlin organised their own nets of distribution; they published various leaflets, magazines and journals at their own expenses, such as "Cabaret Voltaire", "Dada", "Der Dada", "Der blutige Ernst", "Der Zeltweg", "Die Pleite" and "Jedermann sein eigener Fussball" among others.

explicitly calling for a propagandistic “Tendenzkunst im Dienste der revolutionären Sache”, as Grosz put it.⁹

Whereas the Malik-circle was generally more in favour of explicit, concrete and politically unambiguous messages, Hausmann, Richard Huelsenbeck and Johannes Baader fought their war against Wilhelminian culture on a different level. This conflict within Berlin Dada concerned not necessarily the aims, even though the Malik-circle was much more strictly working in the service of a communist revolution, but rather the means. As van den Berg has pointed out:

Huelsenbeck und Hausmann [lehnten] nicht nur eine Politisierung der Kunst für die Sache des Proletariats grundsätzlich ab, sie unterminierten darüber hinaus zielstrebig jede feste Bedeutungszuweisung, wogegen Herzfelde (und wohl auch Grosz und Heartfield) eine neue Eindeutigkeit der künstlerischen Mittel gerade als Vorzug neuer dadaistischer Kunst verstand(en).¹⁰

This rift in Berlin Dada is paradigmatic: it illustrates the difference between explicit political messages conveyed on the content level and a broader cultural critique conveyed on the level of signs, within language itself. What is at stake is the difference between concrete criticism communicated in explicit and unambiguous semantic statements and “semiological warfare”, as John Picchione has aptly called it – a cultural critique fought on a meta-semiotic level manifest in the taking apart of the language system.¹¹ Whereas the social and political impulse might be the same, it is the level on which this war is fought which is under dispute: it is the conflict between a criticism so profound that it accepts nothing as given, not even language, one which attacks all orders and intervenes into the linguistic code itself on the one hand, and clear political statements, which do not question the language or the medium on the other.¹²

⁹ Cf. and quoted from Hubert van den Berg, *Avantgarde und Anarchismus. Dada in Zürich und Berlin*, p. 396.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 394 f.

¹¹ Cf. John Picchione, “Poetry in revolt: Italian avant-garde movements in the Sixties”. In: K. David Jackson, Eric Vos and Johanna Drucker (eds.), *Experimental – Visual – Concrete: Avant-Garde Poetry Since the 1960s*. Amsterdam; Atlanta: Rodopi, 1986, p. 106.

¹² This polarity within Dada is perhaps slightly exaggerated here for the sake of clarification; in reality both factions mix these diverging techniques together, but one tends generally more towards the first and the other more towards the latter procedure. The protagonists of the Malik-circle too were formally innovative, and broke with many conventions and rules, and used photomontage, expressive

Hausmann, Baader and Huelsenbeck went a step further into the semiotic jungle, and perceived the omission or blurring of concrete messages as the most radical gesture of protest possible. In fact, the programmatic withdrawal of sense and logic, the attack upon strategies of perception and mechanisms of thinking is one of the most distinctive and important procedures deployed by Hausmann: “Wir wollen dem schläfrigen Sicherheitsgehirn des Bürgers alles entziehen”, he proclaims, and that includes above all semantic compatibility and logical coherence, discursive, communicative and semantic values and the abandonment of the message orientated deployment of language in favour of the exposure of its structural organisation itself.¹³ The obliteration of clear signifieds is what makes the Dadaists’ cultural critique so evasive and hard to get a hold of: “Dass sie uns nicht an die Wand stellen können, das macht uns feierlich.”¹⁴

Hausmann writes in an essay on photomontage: “Aber genauso revolutionär wie der Inhalt, der Gedanke der Fotomontage, so umstürzlerisch war auch die Form.”¹⁵ The focus here again, as in Zurich, is not so much on art itself, but rather upon the expression of ideas via the manipulation of the material. Dadaism is a mode of cultural criticism, Hausmann declares:

[...] nicht nur die Malerei, sondern alle Kunstgattungen und künstlerischen Techniken [benötigen] eine umwälzende Veränderung [...], sollten sie mit dem Leben der Zeit überhaupt noch Verbindung haben. Den Mitgliedern des Club Dada [...] lag [zunächst] an der Kunst fast nichts, an der materialhaft neuen Ausdrucksform neuer Inhalte aber alles. Der Dadaismus [war] eine Art von Kulturkritik [...].¹⁶

“Der Dadaismus ist der zentrale Angriff auf die Kultur des Bürgers!” Hausmann proclaims, and on that issue, both factions within Berlin Dada stood united: they wanted to have an impact with their art, they wanted to actively change and influence

typography etc., but nevertheless, they often held on to the content level, and were thus less radical in that respect than the others.

¹³ Raoul Hausmann, “Bilanz der Feierlichkeiten”. In: *Bilanz der Feierlichkeiten. Texte bis 1933*, p. 70.

¹⁴ Raoul Hausmann, “Der deutsche Spießler ärgert sich”. In: Raoul Hausmann, *Am Anfang war Dada*. Edited by Karl Riha and Günter Kämpf. Giessen: Anabas-Verlag, 1972, p. 79.

¹⁵ Raoul Hausmann, “Fotomontage”. In: *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen. Texte bis 1933*, p. 130.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

their recipients, their art was to be of socio-political relevance.¹⁷ As van den Berg has pointed out, their concern was not just with aesthetics: “Der Anspruch gesellschaftlicher Relevanz, der nicht nur von den Dadaisten erhoben wurde, [...] [war] Grundtendenz der gesamten historischen Avantgarde [...]”¹⁸

5.3 Cultural Climates and the Importance of Being Topical

In “Aussichten oder Ende des Neodadaismus”, a polemic against all post-Dada neo-avant-garde art and literature, Hausmann emphasises the importance of the prevailing cultural climate, the contemporary *Zeitgeist* of an era, which, he believes, elicits and stirs similar artistic concerns and experimental strategies in diverse movements in many countries at the same time. The atmosphere and mood at the beginning of the past century, he claims, literally demanded Dada:

Alle Erfindungen werden gemacht, wenn sie notwendig werden. Dafür gibt es ein Klima. Die geistigen Klimas sind dem Hochdruck und dem Tiefdruck der Atmosphäre vergleichbar, vielleicht sind sie einfach eine geistige meteorologische Angelegenheit, die zur gleichen Zeit über Ländern und ganzen Kontinenten die gleichen Spannungen in den Hirnen der Künstler herbeiführen. [...] Das geistige Weltklima verlangte dies.¹⁹

It is true indeed that, in spite of many differences, the diverse avant-garde movements which were operating roughly at the same time as Dada, were united by certain shared basic concerns, techniques and strategies. Moreover, one trait particularly characteristic for Berlin Dada is its direct response to the events of the immediate present, its decided up-to-dateness, its claim to be the most powerful expression of the prevailing atmosphere. “Die Kunst, das ist die Konsequenz all der Kräfte einer Zeit”, writes Hausmann.²⁰ Huelsenbeck too proclaims that artists are the creatures of their epoch, “verbissen in den Intellekt ihrer Zeit”, and that the highest art will be that which is aware of and presents the thousand-fold problems of the times:

¹⁷ Raoul Hausmann, “Objektive Betrachtung der Rolle des Dadaismus”. In: *Bilanz der Feierlichkeiten. Texte bis 1933*, p. 113.

¹⁸ Hubert Van den Berg, *Avantgarde und Anarchismus. Dada in Zürich und Berlin*, p. 339.

¹⁹ Raoul Hausmann, “Aussichten oder Ende des Neo-DADAismus”. In: *Am Anfang war Dada*, p. 155.

²⁰ Raoul Hausmann, “Aufruf zur elementaren Kunst”. In: *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen. Texte bis 1933*, p. 31.

Die Kunst ist in ihrer Ausführung und Richtung von der Zeit abhängig, in der sie lebt, und die Künstler sind Kreaturen ihrer Epoche. Die höchste Kunst wird diejenige sein, die in ihren Bewußtseinsinhalten die tausendfachen Probleme der Zeit präsentiert, der man anmerkt, daß sie sich von den Explosionen der letzten Woche werfen ließ, die ihre Glieder immer wieder unter dem Stoß des letzten Tages zusammensucht.²¹

Dada is the international expression of the times, states Huelsenbeck. The proclamation of ultimate and unsurpassable up-to-datedness, the assertion to be the crucial manifestation of a prevailing cultural climate and the most progressive, relevant and topical artistic trend, is indeed a general characteristic of avant-garde movements. The Dadaists claim to be distinguished by a direct and instantaneous relation to their immediate surroundings: they gather direct inspiration from the simultaneous jumble of noises, colours and sensations of modern life, which are pasted straight into their art:

Das Wort Dada symbolisiert das primitivste Verhältnis zur umgebenden Wirklichkeit [...]. Das Leben erscheint als ein simultanes Gewirr von Geräuschen, Farben und geistigen Rhythmen, das in die dadaistische Kunst unbeirrt mit allen sensationellen Schreien und Fiebern seiner verwegenen Alltagspsyche und in seiner gesamten brutalen Realität übernommen wird. [...] Der Dadaismus steht zum erstenmal dem Leben nicht mehr ästhetisch gegenüber [...].²²

This taking over of unmediated “brutal reality” is manifest not only in the expression of a latent sense of chaos, disorder and turmoil, but also in the insertion of real life materials into dadaist art: the photomontages for instance feature cut-out images from advertisements and newspapers and thus contain elements from the sphere of current political events and consumer products.

5.4 Poster Poems, Ready-Mades and the Death of Reference

“Dada [...] benützt alle Formen und Gebräuche, um die moralisch-pharisäische Bürgerwelt mit ihren eigenen Mitteln zu zerschlagen”, writes Hausmann, and this

²¹ Richard Huelsenbeck, “Dadaistisches Manifest”. In: *Am Anfang war Dada*, p. 23.

²² Ibid., p. 25.

appropriation of forms and customs of bourgeois society is particularly manifest in the annexion of what Karl Riha calls “literarische Gebrauchsformen”:²³

Symptomatisch war das Anknüpfen an literarische Gebrauchsformen wie Annonce, Plakat, Zeitungsmeldung, Schlagzeile, Parole, Telegramm, Postkarte, Programmzettel usw. [...].²⁴

Hausmann's use of the poster-medium, which he adapted for the purpose of displaying poetry in 1918, has to be considered with Riha's point in mind. Posters are an information medium; they serve to disseminate data, to announce concrete messages, mostly by means of a combination of verbal and visual elements, linguistic and graphic signs which appeal simultaneously to the mind and the eye. Posters, though they are hybrids between word- and image-media, strike mainly through their visual qualities: even the language elements are typographically enhanced and highly ocular. Posters have to be perceived in their total visual organisation, at a glance, before being deciphered in a successive fashion.

Hausmann exchanges the conventional medium of poetry, the page, for a medium affiliated with the sphere of fine arts, one which is public rather than private and the purpose of which is functional rather than literary. He is amongst the first to dispense with the traditional haven of the page, and paves the way for poetry to leave its designated realm in order to climb the walls of galleries and invade public spaces. Ironically, Hausmann radically subverts the poster's very function, namely to communicate concrete functional messages: his poems are characterised particularly by the absence of any message. As Enno Stahl has pointed out, Hausmann's choice of an information-medium poignantly highlights and mocks the fact that there is no information conveyed.²⁵

One of these poster poems is “fmsbw”, which was originally printed on red paper, in a format of 32,5 x 47,5 cm, and features the letters “fmsbwtözü” in the first line, and “pggiv - ..?mü” in the second. The letters are all lower case. Four punctuation marks are incorporated as well: a dash, two dots and a question mark. The font is

²³ Raoul Hausmann, “Was will der Dadaismus in Europa?”. In: *Bilanz der Feierlichkeiten. Texte bis 1933*, p. 95.

²⁴ Karl Riha, “Nachwort”. In: *Dada total. Manifeste, Aktionen, Texte, Bilder*, p. 356.

²⁵ Cf. Enno Stahl, *Anti-Kunst und Abstraktion in der literarischen Moderne (1909- 1933)*, pp. 336-337.

unified, and consonants dominate: only three of the upper ten letters are vowels, and only two of the lower seven, a fact which Christian Scholz attributes to the natural predominance of consonants in the typesetter's case, from which the letters were allegedly chosen by chance.

fmsbwtözäu
pggïv-?mü

Raoul Hausmann, "fmsbw", 1918

Hausmann claims that the sequence of linguistic signs on his poster-poem is a chance product, chosen entirely at random by the typesetter, who was commissioned with the task to set the first four poster poems in 1918 "nach seiner eigenen Laune".

Im Oktober [...] ließ ich in der Druckerei von Robert Barthe in der Dennewitzstraße "Material der Malerei, Plastik, Architektur 1918" setzen, in dem ich die "écriture automatique" anwandte. Da sah ich durch Zufall, dass einer der Setzer große Plakatschrifttypen ablegte, wie der Fachausdruck lautet – und da kam mir eine völlig neue Idee! Könnte er nicht einfach willkürlich mir solche Buchstaben auf einigen Plakaten zusammenstellen, nach seiner eigenen Laune? Ich setzte ihm mein Vorhaben auseinander, und im Laufe einer guten Stunde waren vier Plakatgedichte entstanden, von denen das erste lautete:

Fmsbwtäzü [sic], pgiff? mü²⁶

"Es war das erste 'Readymade' der Literatur, ausgeführt nach den Gesetzen des Zufalls", Hausmann proclaims.²⁷ The ready-made nature of this poem is an important point. Hausmann has not ordered and arranged the signs of the alphabet in any meaningful or intentional sequence, he has not used or manipulated them as means

²⁶ Raoul Hausmann, "Aussichten oder Ende des Neo-DADAismus", p. 156.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 156.

for something else, but has instead chosen to present them as what they are: prefabricated raw material, building blocks, the atoms of discourse. The letters are aligned in an arbitrary sequence and thus robbed of their signifying capacity, entirely deprived of their functional value. Their combination is linguistically illegal; the only convention they conform to is the linear horizontal arrangement.

Moreover, Hausmann has not even arranged them himself, but instead had them placed by the typesetter at random, which deprives this work even of the notion of being intentionally contrived, and introduces the element of chance into the artistic discourse. Here, the outcome of the work of art is no longer determined by the artist; the result of the creative process becomes an arbitrary product. Chance presents yet another weapon against the predominance of rationality and usefulness, coherence and conventions: it effectively devalues cause and effect and thus subverts and eclipses bourgeois logic. Roberto Simanowski points out

daß das aleatorische Verfahren auf eine Kreativität jenseits bekannter Konstruktionsmuster zielt und der Zufall zugleich von der als zufällig verstandenen Subjektivität befreit.²⁸

Hausmann thus abandons two vital premises of an artwork: that it is a self-made piece of “handicraft” and that it is purposefully and intentionally composed. Instead he simply commissioned someone to mingle pre-existing linguistic particles together in a random fashion.

As a consequence of its method of composition, “fmsbw” is almost entirely non-referential: unlike Ball’s “Karawane”, it lacks even the slightest allusion to or resemblance of existing words. The letter sequence does not even formally qualify as a word-like construct, since there are no spaces in between that would generate something looking like a word on a visual level. All that remains is a chain of unrelated signs which do not fuse into a higher linguistic unit – the letters remain monadic fragments. This too can be considered as an attempt to withdraw into the seemingly pure, neutral, material realm of language. The monadic letter, Roland Barthes writes, is innocent, for it is in an adamic state: unchained singular signs are

²⁸ Roberto Simanowski, *Interfictions. Vom Schreiben im Netz*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002, p. 71.

signs prior to fault because they are prior to discourse, and thus still devoid of any ideological baggage:

Car la lettre, si elle est seule, est innocente: la faute, les fautes commencent lorsqu'on *aligne* les lettres pour en faire des mots (quel meilleur moyen de mettre fin au discours de l'autre que de défaire le mot et de le faire revenir à la lettre primordiale comme il est bien dit dans la locution populaire: *n, i, ni, c'est fini*).²⁹

Stahl asserts too that Hausmann was the first to take the decisive plunge away from words or syllables towards singular isolated signs. Just as the Italian Futurists freed words from the confines of syntax, so Hausmann frees letters from the commitment to convey messages. Signs are now not particles of meaning, but have gained autonomy and freedom from being bound into higher units; they have gained an aesthetic validity of their own. They do not refer to an external reality but only to themselves and the sign system of usage. The chain of signification is interrupted, signifiers become their own referents: the signifiers signify themselves. They do not represent an absent object anymore, they do not fill an empty presence, but refer only to their own material essence. In this sense, "fmsbw" can be considered as a concrete poem *avant la lettre*. And it is in this sense too that Hausmann's poem can be considered an example of abstract poetry, as defined by Stahl:

Abstrakte Dichtung ist literarische Ungegenständlichkeit, deren Ausdrucksmittel auf einer unmittelbaren Wirkung des sprachlichen Materials beruht, das heißt deren Zeichen ohne vermittelnden Bezug zur Alltagswirklichkeit oder zur fiktiven, aber nachvollziehbaren Vorstellungswelten auskommen. Abstrakte Dichtung ist also phonetischer, visueller oder gänzlich sprachbegrifflicher Natur. Letztere besitzt einen Sinn, nicht aber in Form fassbarer Signifikate; sie besteht aus Zeichen, die

²⁹ Roland Barthes, "Erté ou A la lettre". In: Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes. Tome II. 1966-1973*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994, p. 1232.

Barthes elaborates further: "D'une certaine façon, avec le mot, avec la suite intelligible de lettres, c'est le mal qui commence. Aussi, antérieur ou extérieur au mot, l'alphabet accomplit-il une sorte d'état adamique du langage: c'est le langage avant la faute, parce que c'est le langage avant le discours, avant le syntagme, et cependant, déjà, par la richesse substitutive de la lettre, entièrement ouvert sur les trésors du symbole. Voilà pourquoi, outre leur grâce, leur invention, leur qualité esthétique, ou plutôt à travers ces propriétés mêmes, que ne vient ternir aucune intention de sens (de discours), les lettres de Erté sont des objets *heureux*. [...] Erté nous apporte en don la lettre pure, qui n'est encore compromise dans aucune association et n'est dès lors touchée par aucune possibilité de faute: gracieuse et incorruptible." Ibid., p. 1234.

allenfalls wiederum auf Zeichen oder das zugrundeliegende Zeichensystem verweisen, nicht aber auf konkrete Gegenstände.³⁰

Hausmann's letters poignantly illustrate de Saussure's assertion that signs function exclusively in a system of difference and relations, lacking any positive values of their own if they are not used in concordance with existing rules.

"fmsbw" is both a visual and a sound poem; it is an "optophonetic" poem, as Hausmann has called it. The poem draws all attention to the material, to the sensual qualities of language signs: to texture, plasticity, sound and shape. The poster-version of the poem is both a self-sufficient work of art/literature as well as a score for, or graphical support of, the sound version:

Die Futuristen und besonders die Dadaisten erkannten, dass Lesen, oder Mitteilen von Lauten nur optisch wirksam gemacht werden kann. In gewissen, um 1919 entstandenen Druckseiten wurde das physiologisch-optische Princip erstmals konsequent durchgeführt. Nicht ohne Sinn wurde das rein fonetische Gedicht erfunden, das durch eine neuartige Typo-graphie optisch unterstützt war.³¹

Hausmann's poster poems are to be looked at, to be taken in at one glance like an image: the letters are not only to be read subsequently, but also to be perceived, which constitutes a profound confusion of strategies of perception, similar to that caused by the insertion of letters into pictures by the Cubists. Letters are usually deciphered one by one and one after the other, but since they cannot be fused into a coherent sequence in the mind of the readers, they are forced to fall back to other ways of approaching this poem, which is one of Hausmann's motivations for exchanging the conventional medium of poetry against one of the visual arts:

Schließlich und endlich, Buchstabengedichte sind wohl auch zum Sehen da, aber auch zum Ansehen – warum also nicht Plakate aus ihnen machen? Auf verschiedenfarbigem Papier und in großen Druckbuchstaben? Das wäre, Dunnerschlag, noch nicht dagewesen [...].³²

³⁰ Enno Stahl, *Anti-Kunst und Abstraktion in der literarischen Moderne (1909- 1933)*, p. 32.

³¹ Raoul Hausmann, "Typographie". In: *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen. Texte bis 1933*, p. 163.

³² Raoul Hausmann, "Zur Geschichte des Lautgedichts". In: *Am Anfang war Dada*, p. 42.

“fmsbw’s” other level of significance is its sounds: Hausmann recited the poem on various occasions.³³ In the spoken version, all attention is on the human voice, on the tools for articulation, on the physical production of speech. “Konsonanten und Vokale, das krächzt und jodelt sehr gut!”, writes Hausmann. “Natürlich, diese Buchstabenplakatgedichte mußten gesungen werden! DA! DADA!”³⁴ The concrete poet Ernst Jandl credits him for allowing the voice total liberty of expression for the first time ever, for Hausmann has shed any analogy with the voice serving the purpose of communication:

Raoul Hausmann war der eigentliche Begründer des Lautgedichts, jenes Lautgedichts nämlich, das die Ähnlichkeit mit einer zur Verständigung dienenden Stimme abgelegt hat, indem es der Stimme mit allen ihren Möglichkeiten totale Freiheit gewährt.³⁵

Hausmann’s sound poetry directs the attention to the place where speech is physically produced, and to the organs involved in its formation: sound poetry becomes a bodily affair. The vocal capacities for producing trans-linguistic sounds are recovered; the bodily organs of articulation are challenged by unusual, difficult sequences, and submerged possibilities of vocal expression are retrieved. The body and its organs are transformed into poetic material, as Stahl has pointed out:

Das heißt, das Dichten ist prinzipiell seines spirituellen Nimbus beraubt, es ist eine Sache des Körpers und seiner Gegebenheiten, Lautdichtung ist die Reduktion auf diese Gegebenheiten, ist also unmittelbarer Ausdruck des Materials, über das der Körper verfügen kann. Und hierin liegt die positive Qualität, eine reinigende Wirkung der Lautpoesie, die den Körper ganz zu sich selbst kommen lässt – ohne Vermittlung irgendeines übergreifenden Sinnsystems [...].³⁶

The body, in contrast to language, is perceived as pure and natural; by means of withdrawing to the body, language can be avoided. While Ball created a smooth, euphonious and pleasing sound composition with “Karawane”, Hausmann’s poem is

³³ For a recorded version from 1958 by Hausmann himself, cf. Wolfgang Hörner & Herbert Kapfer (eds.), *Alles Lalula. Songs & Poeme. Originalaufnahmen von Valentin über Schwitters bis zur Beat-Generation*. LIDO, 2003.

³⁴ Raoul Hausmann, “Zur Geschichte des Lautgedichts”, p. 43.

³⁵ Quoted from Enno Stahl, *Anti-Kunst und Abstraktion in der literarischen Moderne (1909- 1933)*, p. 336.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

quite the opposite: a cacophonious instrumentation of thwarted, difficult noises.³⁷ He maintains:

Das Gedicht macht sich mit Lauten, die dem Kehlkopf und den
Stimmbändern entspringen, und es kennt keine Syntax, sondern nur Fortlauf
und Hemmung.³⁸

Obstruction and impediment are indeed vital principles here: not only is the act of reading obstructed, but also that of articulation – the enunciation of the poem is thwarted and made difficult. The frequency of consonants with no vowels in between renders verbalisation into a bodily challenge, a venture for the organs of articulation. Violation, boycott and de-automatisation of all strategies of reception is thus complete. The impediment of mechanisms of articulation serves once more to direct attention to the physical features of the letters, this time towards the very process of their verbal formation: the movements of the tongue, the flow of air, the closing and opening of the glottis, the vibrations of the vocal cords. Awareness of the most basic bundles of phonetic features of human speech sounds is thus enforced.

5.5 Attacking the Symbolic Order: The Radicalism of the Zero-Message

As in Ball's case, Hausmann's renunciation of the discursive function of language has highly utopian motives: "der neue Mensch, der heraufkommt, bedarf einer neuen, von keiner Vergangenheit beschmutzten Sprache", he writes.³⁹ "Die 'lettristische' Poesie, die ich 1918 unabhängig von Ball fand, war auch auf der Notwendigkeit, eine neue sprachliche Ausdrucksform zu finden, aufgebaut."⁴⁰ Moreover, Hausmann too despairs about the arbitrary and convention-based nature of language: "Worte haben gar keinen Sinn, außer dem, den ihnen die Gewohnheit verliehen hat – alles andere, jede Sinngebung ist vergeblich, umsonst!"⁴¹

³⁷ Nevertheless, "fmsbw" has served as inspiration and basic sound material for another piece, a euphonious verbal sonata, perhaps the avant-garde piece which is most truly intermedial in spirit, borderlining on the threshold to music: Kurt Schwitters' "Ursonate".

³⁸ Quoted from Karl Riha, "Anmerkungen zu einem Porträt Raoul Hausmanns". In: *Am Anfang war Dada*, p. 167.

³⁹ Raoul Hausmann, "Die neue Kunst. Betrachtungen (für Arbeiter)" In: *Bilanz der Feierlichkeiten. Texte bis 1933*, p. 185.

⁴⁰ Raoul Hausmann, "Zur Geschichte des Lautgedichts", p. 37.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Scholz detects a “Verweigerungshaltung bezüglich der Verwendung der Sprache als Mittel der Diskursivität” in Hausmann’s poster poems: “Hausmanns Revolte gegen das herkömmliche Hören und Lesen stellt so den vertrauten Zusammenhang zwischen Schrift und Aussage in Frage.”⁴² Scholz argues that the absence of sense and a concrete message is experienced as shock by the recipient, in that awareness is drawn to the preconditions of communication and the very act of the production of meaning. Hausmann, he argues, exposes the thin boundaries between sound and word, the point of transition from abstract lines to script:

[Das Postergedicht] setzt den Schock vielmehr bewusst ein, um dem Rezipienten in der Negation sprachlicher Konventionen die Bedingungen von Kommunikation bewusst werden zu lassen und den Übergang vom Laut zum Wort, von sinnfreien Linien zur Schrift zu verdeutlichen.⁴³

However, there is much more to Hausmann’s poem: the implications of the abandonment of the referential dimension are significantly more radical than that. Hausmann, like Ball, perceived language as infected, as a stained ritual, and intuitively understood that language in its present state was not a suitable vehicle for the radical cultural critique he wanted to convey: it had to be expressed on the level of signs, on the level of code:

Wir wollen alle schönen, hohen, edlen, feierlichen Worte vermeiden und die Begriffe, die sie versinnbildlichen, anzweifeln – weil sie der Bürger verseucht und vergiftet hat. [...] Alle ehrwürdigen Worte sind heute vom Bürger entwertet, alle dienen ihm nur dazu, Sicherungen und Verdrehungen seines Ausbeutungsdranges in Poetik und Sentimentalität zu sein [...].⁴⁴

Language, Hausmann feels, is poisoned, depreciated and contaminated by the bourgeoisie and the way they orchestrate signs for their purposes. Thus even language could not remain unquestioned, the order of signs too had to be dismantled. For Hausmann, language is one, if not the most important, manifestation of the symbolic systems and codes which constitute culture and human experience. An

⁴² Christian Scholz, “Bezüge zwischen ‘Lautpoesie’ und ‘visueller Poesie’. Vom ‘optophonetischen Gedicht’ zum ‘Multimedia-Text’ – ein historischer Abriss”, p. 119.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 120.

⁴⁴ Raoul Hausmann, “Bilanz der Feierlichkeiten”, p. 69.

attack on language is thus a symbolic attack on the codes and rituals which amount to social order.⁴⁵

“Dada ist die willentliche Zersetzung der bürgerlichen Begriffswelt”, reads a poster at the Berlin Dada fair in 1920.⁴⁶ This statement is significant in two ways: not only does it literally refer to one of the key literary techniques of the dadaist poets – language dissection, the shattering of discourse – but it also alludes to the very reason why this technique is so revolutionary and far-reaching in its implications in the first place. It is not just language which is taken apart, but in fact the bourgeois “Begriffswelt” and all that comes with it: convention, agreement and social consensus, hierarchies and power structures, the *Weltbild* contained within language and the possibility of stable meaning. The audience of the Dada soirées seems to have grasped this radical assault on their values intuitively:

[...] die wichtigsten Manifestationen waren selbstverständlich diejenigen, bei denen Tausende von Personen, toll vor Wut gegen uns, bereit waren, uns zu töten – denn sie hatten verstanden, daß DADA ihre höchsten Güter und heiligsten Ideale bedrohte.⁴⁷

In fact it seems as if not the proclamation of heretic and offensive propositions or outrageous political messages caused the outbreaks of rage at the Dada soirées, but rather the absence of any tangible messages at all. It was the zero message, the empty signifiers, the indeterminacy and the ultimate ambivalence which the audiences found unbearable. It was the inability to bear a void of signification, which forced the recipients to question and reassess their own assumptions and values, which caused the outrage. Hausmann’s empty signifiers cannot be put to work in the cultural machinery, they are defunctionalised and depragmatised, they are essentially deprived of their use-value. As empty signifiers, they cannot be assimilated.

⁴⁵ More than fifty years later, Jean Baudrillard proclaims that even signs must burn, “[I]es signes doivent brûler eux aussi”, a slogan which seems to capture poignantly the nature of many avant-garde activities, in which nothing, not even language, is accepted as given anymore. Jean Baudrillard, “Vers une critique de l’économie politique du signe”. In: Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l’économie politique du signe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972, p. 199.

⁴⁶ Slogan on poster at the Berlin Dada Fair of 1920. Quoted from Marc Dachy (ed.), *Journal du Mouvement Dada 1915 – 1923*. Geneva: Edition d’Art Albert Skira S. A., 1989, p. 104.

⁴⁷ Raoul Hausmann, “Dada empört sich, regt sich und stirbt in Berlin”. In: *Dada Berlin. Texte, Manifeste, Aktionen*, p. 9.

To return to the conflict smouldering within Berlin Dada: the issues at stake were basically questions of strategy and terrain. While impulse and intentions might have been similar, one faction recognised the futility of ideological propositions and launched its attack on the level of the signifier, abandoning reference, use-value, unequivocal messages and political signifieds, while the other faction left the language of painting and discourse more or less intact for the sake of the transportation of unequivocal political messages.⁴⁸ As Hausmann recalls:

Dada hätte vor allem eine anti-kulturelle Tat sein müssen. Die Anti-Kunst entzieht den Dingen und Materialien ihren Nützlichkeitscharakter, ebenso ihre konkrete und zivile Bedeutung; sie stürzt die klassischen Werte um und macht sie halbabstrakt.

Doch dieser Vorgang wurde nur zum Teil und nur von einigen DADAisten verstanden, die sich nicht über die politischen Absichten hinwegsetzen wollten. Hier findet sich die ganze Schuld der DADAisten, verursacht durch ihre Unverantwortlichkeit.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Jean Baudrillard illustrates a similar conflict in *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, where he writes about the difference between the muralists and the graffitiists, whose works flooded the walls and subways in New York in the spring of 1972: while the two factions shared the same aims and acted upon similar political impulses, the muralists accepted the language of painting as given, and painted concrete, figurative and explicitly political messages. The graffitiists, Baudrillard argues, did not, for they knew that deep ideology was futile. They acted upon a revolutionary intuition which made them abandon concrete political signifieds and content altogether: "Ceci procède d'une sorte d'intuition révolutionnaire – à savoir que l'idéologie profonde ne fonctionne plus au niveau des signifiés politiques, mais au niveau des signifiants – et que c'est là où le système est vulnérable et doit être démantelé." Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976, p. 123.

Graffiti, Baudrillard proposes, is more offensive and radical, because it is trans-ideological and trans-artistic, avoiding every reference and every origin. "Eux seuls sont sauvages, en ce que leur message est nul", he maintains, because "[l]a pensée occidentale ne supporte pas, n'a jamais supporté au fond le vide de la signification, le non-lieu et la non-valeur." Ibid., p. 127; p. 137.

⁴⁹ Raoul Hausmann, "Dada empört sich, regt sich und stirbt in Berlin", pp. 10-11.

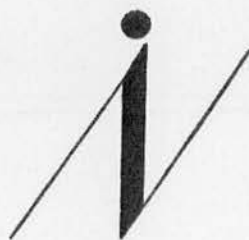
6. PREPARING THE GROUND FOR CONCRETE: CONSTRUCTIVIST VENTURES, CONCRETION AND THE IDEOGRAM

6.1 Kurt Schwitters and the Constructivist Spirit

Hausmann's poster poem is superseded in succinctness and reduction by one other poem, written in 1922: Kurt Schwitters's "i-Gedicht", which consists of only one singular letter, and the rhyming instructions for use, "(lies: "rauf, runter, rauf, Pünktchen drauf")", which is a primary-school memory aid for children, a coaching-rhyme advising them how to draw the letter "i". The rhyme is a ready-made functional sentence of every day usage which is decontextualised and deprived of its practical value. Moreover, it explicitly draws the reader's attention to the material constitution of the linguistic sign, to its very method of production, construction, texture and internal architecture. Mon maintains:

Schrift und Sprache rücken dicht aneinander – am dichtesten vielleicht in dem dadaistischen "I-Gedicht" Kurt Schwitters. [...] das Zweitrangige erscheint als das Gewichtige, das Zeichen wichtiger als das Bezeichnete; zugleich wird der ganze konventionelle Schreibvorgang bloßgestellt.¹

Das i-Gedicht



(lies: »rauf, runter, rauf, Pünktchen drauf«)

Kurt Schwitters, "i-Gedicht", 1922

An "i", the old-fashioned cursive hand-written script type, Schwitters reminds us, consists of three lines, two of them thin, parallel and askew, one of them bold and straight, topped with a single dot. He draws attention to detail and to microaesthetic

¹ Franz Mon, "Schrift als Sprache". In: Franz Mon, *Texte über Texte*. Neuwied; Berlin: Luchterhand, 1970, p. 60.

structures, making the reader aware of the most basic material constituents of linguistic signs, for ultimately all letters consist of lines, curves and dots. “i” itself, like the signs in “fmsbw”, is a ready-made element, an object or idea which has been chosen by the artist and placed into a new context. Schwitters writes:

Der Künstler erkennt, dass in der ihn umgebenden Welt von Erscheinungsformen irgendeine Einzelheit nur begrenzt und aus ihrem Zusammenhang gerissen zu werden braucht, damit ein Kunstwerk entsteht.²

Idea, choice and placement of ready-made objects are the vital artistic activities which are at the centre of Schwitter’s Merz poem. The chosen material, moreover, is hardly changed or altered: the unrefined material itself is declared as the work of art, a conception which attacks any kind of traditional notions of art as handicraft, as original and carefully crafted and executed – a notion which is distinctly reminiscent of Duchamp’s conception of the ready made. Schwitters writes:

Merz bedient sich zum Formen des Kunstwerks grosser fertiger Komplexe, die als Material gelten, um den Weg von der Institution bis zur Sichtbarmachung der künstlerischen Idee möglichst abzukürzen, damit nicht viele Wärmeverluste durch Reibung entstehen. i setzt diesen Weg = null. Idee, Material und Kunstwerk sind dasselbe.³

Schwitter’s “i-Gedicht” is the ultimate celebration of the material qualities of language: a singular linguistic sign, referring to nothing but itself and its visual qualities, self-consciously exposing its own method of construction in a little rhyme underneath, now presents the only subject matter. The monadic sign itself has become the work of art. This operation is very much in tune with Schwitters’ explorations in the realms of collage and assemblage, as he himself points out:

Die Merzdichtung ist abstrakt. Sie verwendet analog der Merzmalerei als gegebene Teile fertige Sätze aus Zeitungen, Plakaten, Katalogen, Gesprächen usw., mit und ohne Abänderungen. (Das ist furchtbar). Diese Teile brauchen nicht zum Sinn zu passen, denn es gibt keinen Sinn mehr. (Das ist auch furchtbar.)⁴

² Quoted from Karl Riha, “Nachwort”. In: *Dada total. Manifeste, Aktionen, Texte, Bider*, p. 364.

³ Kurt Schwitters, “i (Ein Manifest)”. In: *ibid.*, p. 172.

⁴ Kurt Schwitters, “Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Künstler.” In: *Das literarische Werk*. Edited by Friedhelm Lach. Cologne: Velag M. DuMont Schauberg, 1973, vol. 1, p. 38.

Significantly, Schwitters also used another sequence of ready-made materials as basic building blocks for a text-based art work: his “Ursonate”, composed between 1922 and 1932, is based on and inspired by Hausmann’s “fmsbw”, and presents a remarkable example of cross-fertilisation and further development of certain lines of questioning within the avant-garde. Schwitters expanded Hausmann’s optophonetic sequence, equipped with additional vowels and transformed into “Fümms bö wö tää zää Uu”, into a lengthy sound poem, a piece oscillating between music and poetry. The definitive version, with typography by Jan Tschichold, was published as a 29 pages long special issue of Schwitters’ journal *Merz* in 1932. The piece, as John Elderfield has pointed out, oscillates between pre-linguistic, abstract and sometimes onomatopoeic elements, which are framed in a classical sonata form, including movements, repetitions, variations and thematic motifs. The conventional form clashes drastically with the content, the tension deriving from the “classical order that harnesses and controls the primitivism of parts.”⁵ Its carefully constructed character and its crafted verbal architecture bear witness to Schwitters’ general development in that period.

In the early 1920s, Schwitters, as well as Hausmann, Hannah Höch, Tristan Tzara, Hans Richter and Viktor Eggeling, embarked on increasingly more constructivist ventures, both in literature and in the realms of fine art. Van den Berg considers the turn towards constructivism as a transnational “Tendenzwende” within the European and Russian avant-garde movements, as an initially independent change of direction which later resulted in numerous collaborations, shared projects and new alliances across national boundaries and different movements. Van den Berg considers Kazimir Malevich’s suprematist pictures, first exhibited in the futurist exhibition “0.10” in St. Peterburg in Russia in 1915, and the foundation of the Dutch magazine *De Stijl* in 1917 as significant indicators of this new tendency. He writes:

Im Laufe und am Ende des 1. Weltkriegs lassen sich in der europäischen Avantgarde gleichzeitig, jedoch anfänglich unabhängig voneinander verschiedene Ansätze einer neuen Entwicklung verzeichnen [...]. Aus diesen unterschiedlichen Ansätzen entsteht eine neue Strömung, die sich zwar lokal der unterschiedlichsten Bezeichnungen bedient oder noch unter alten Bezeichnungen läuft – “Neue Kunst”, “Neo-Kubismus”, “Neo-Plastizismus”, “Neue Gestaltung”, “aktivismus”, “Expressionismus”, “Dada”, “Merz”,

⁵ John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*. London: Thames and Hudson, p. 195.

“Présentismus”, “Elementarismus”, “konkrete Kunst”, “Suprematismus”, “Proun” usw. usf. – die man aber als Konstruktivismus zusammenfassen kann. Diese Bezeichnung Konstruktivismus bildete sich in Rußland im Januar 1921 heraus, wurde aber bald danach auch in anderen europäischen Ländern von den genannten Initiativen oder ihren Fortsetzungen aufgegriffen.⁶

This change of direction is evident not only in various avant-garde productions, but also in the participation of Hausmann, Tzara, Richter, along with Kandinsky, Theo van Doesburg, El Lissitzky and many other important avant-gardists from various different movements, in an international constructivist congress, the “Kongress der ‘Union Internationaler Fortschrittlicher Künstler’”, which took place in Düsseldorf in May 1922, and was accompanied by an exhibition called “I. Internationale Kunstaussstellung”. In September 1922 van Doesburg continued this initiative, and organised the “Kongreß der Dadaisten und Konstruktivisten” in Weimar.

Shared constructivist concerns, which united and brought together characters as diverse as the Futurist Enrico Prampolini, Piet Mondrian, Vladimir Tatlin, Kazimir Malevich, Hans Arp and many others, were an inclination to geometrical abstraction, precision, the rejection of subjectivity and individuality in favour of objectivity, rationality and scientific analysis, a concern with reduction as well as the vision of a new relationship between art and life and a new unity of art and technology. New industrial materials and new rational and functional principles of construction were introduced in order to enter into a dialogue with the processes of industrialisation and modernisation, and art was to establish abstract principles such as order, functionality and harmony, which should ideally serve as models for a new, more rationally constructed society. The Constructivists radically rejected the subjective and individual, the decorative, the literary, the mystical and the figurative.⁷

Van den Berg emphasises particularly the “Übernationalität” of the constructivist spirit in the arts, citing Lissitzky and Ehrenburg amongst others, who point out that the inherent internationality of this new direction is evident in the fact

⁶ Hubert van den Berg, “‘Übernationalität’ der Avantgarde – (Inter-) Nationalität der Forschung. Hinweis auf den internationalen Konstruktivismus in der europäischen Literatur und die Problematik ihrer literaturwissenschaftlichen Erfassung.” In: Wolfgang Asholt, Walter Fähnders (eds), *Der Blick vom Wolkenkratzer. Avantgarde – Avantgardekritik – Avantgardeforschung*, p. 265.

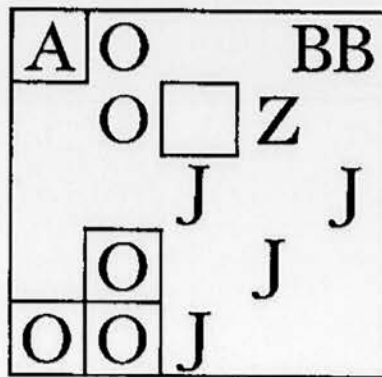
⁷ Cf. Briony Fer, “The Language of Construction”. In: Briony Fer, David Batchelor, Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism. Art between the Wars*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993, pp. 87-169.

daß in Rußland in einer siebenjährigen Periode vollständiger Abgeschlossenheit dieselben Probleme gestellt wurden wie hier bei unseren Freunden im Westen, ohne irgend welche Kenntnis von einander zu haben.⁸

This emergence of an initially independent and later co-ordinated and structured new spirit in the arts, expressing a generally prevailing, Zeitgeist-like tendency, which resulted into transnational collaborations and the establishment of a network of distribution and alliances, is distinctly reminiscent of the history of the concrete poetry movement, as will be explored in the following chapters.

Many of Schwitters' poems from the early 1920s bear witness to the constructivist spirit. As Elderfield emphasises, Schwitters moved deeper and deeper into the constructivist camp, which is evident not only in his close collaboration with the *De Stijl* founder Theo van Doesburg, but also in his *Merz* publications, one of which he co-edited with El Lissitzky, and which feature contributions from various important constructivists. Elderfield writes that *Merz* 8-9 from 1924

represents, moreover, the clearest exposition of Schwitters' own interpretation of the Constructivist esthetics, for through contact with Lissitzky's ideas, Schwitters was able to find a version of this esthetic which corroborated his existing, pre-Constructivist, ideas about art and its formal autonomy but spiritual and primitivist base.⁹



Kurt Schwitters, "Gesetztes Bildgedicht", 1922

⁸ Quoted from Hubert van den Berg, "'Übernationalität' der Avantgarde – (Inter-) Nationalität der Forschung. Hinweis auf den internationalen Konstruktivismus in der europäischen Literatur und die Problematik ihrer literaturwissenschaftlichen Erfassung", p. 268.

⁹ John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, p. 133.

Many of Schwitters' poems of that period, such as "Gesetztes Bildgedicht" from 1922, do indeed display a new emphasis on structure, on the relationships of parts, on rationally ordered construction, on functional and minimalist compositions. Moreover, the "Gesetztes Bildgedicht" borders on the threshold to the fine arts, as already evident in the title, and it is distinctly reminiscent of Piet Mondrian's geometrical constructions: here too one can observe a drastic reduction of the material to the basic building blocks of composition, as well as a geometric grid and a carefully constructed tension between the most elementary units in the repertoire of a given sign system, which corresponds to Mondrian's limitation of the elements of painting to the straight line, the right angle and the three primary colours red, blue and yellow as well as the non-colours black, white and grey. Moreover, Schwitters' poem can be considered as proto concrete:¹⁰ as in other pieces of that period, such as "Cigarren" from 1921, and "Gedicht 25 [elementar]", "Z A [elementar]", "Register [elementar]", all from 1922, the letters or numbers have shed their referential function and represent only themselves, their phonetic and visual qualities, in a truly concrete fashion. They are no longer ciphers and symbols for something else, but they are all there is, they are the subject matter. Elderfield writes: "To use the word (or letter or number) either as a phonetic or a visual unit is to use it as an object or element rather than as an agent of meaning."¹¹ Moreover, the patterns and compositions which they form are rationally constructed, and, as Elderfield and Christopher Middleton point out, "hover[] between the extremes of regularity and predictability on one hand and unpredictability and disorder on the other", a description which also encapsulates the tension between the dada and the constructivist poles in Schwitters's poems.¹² Schwitters considers linguistic elements as material, as parts which can be put into new constructions and take on new meanings:

Material der Dichtung sind Buchstabe, Silbe, Wort, Satz, Absatz. Worte und Sätze sind in der Dichtung weiter nichts als Teile. Ihre Beziehung

¹⁰ Friedrich Lach even explicitly calls the poems of this phase in general "concrete poetry" in his introduction to Schwitters' collected works. Cf. Friedrich Lach, "Vorwort". In: Kurt Schwitters, *Das literarische Werk*, vol 1, pp. 7-27.

¹¹ John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, p. 174.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 175.

untereinander ist nicht die übliche der Umgangssprache, die ja einen anderen Zweck hat: etwas auszudrücken. In der Dichtung werden die Worte aus ihrem alten Zusammenhang gerissen, entformelt und in einen neuen, künstlerischen Zusammenhang gebracht, sie werden Form-Teile der Dichtung, weiter nichts.¹³

It was above all this shared inclination towards abstract, proto-concrete poetry, and a fascination with the Dadaists' agenda on van Doesburg's side, which brought Schwitters and van Doesburg together in 1921. Van Doesburg visited Berlin in 1920, in an attempt to expand his international avant-garde contacts. It was then that he met Hausmann, amongst others, and presumably it was also Hausmann who introduced him to Schwitters.¹⁴ Van Doesburg and Schwitters were to collaborate closely: van Doesburg, under his I. K. Bonset pseudonym, published a Dada journal called *Mécano*, and the two of them went on a Dada Holland tour together in January and February 1923. Van Doesburg represents one of the most important links between Dada, Constructivism, *De Stijl* and concrete art, and thus, by implication, ties the narrative together between the ventures of the historical avant-garde poets and those of the concrete poets.

6.2 Theo van Doesburg, Max Bill and the Beginnings of Concrete Art

In 1930, van Doesburg published his manifesto "Base de la peinture concrète", in which he defines concrete art as a geometric, rational and more constructivist radicalisation of the anti-mimetic tendencies already present in abstract art.¹⁵

¹³ Kurt Schwitters, "Die Bedeutung des Merzgedankens in der Welt". In: *Das literarische Werk*, p. 134.

¹⁴ Cf. Sjarel Ex, "'De Stijl' und Deutschland 1918-1922: Die ersten Kontakte". In: Bernd Finkeldy and Maria Müller (eds), *Konstruktivistische Internationale Schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft. 1922-1927. Utopien für eine Europäische Kultur*. Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1992, p. 77.

¹⁵ As Christina Weiss has pointed out, van Doesburg was also trying to transfer proto-concrete principles into the realm of literature: "In der 'Kundgebung II des "Stijl"' von 1920 versuchten Theo van Doesburg, Piet Mondrian und Anthony Kok ihre Vorstellungen von einer konkreten Malerei auf die Wortkunst zu übertragen: Sie forderten eine Dichtung, die sich von den 'Abklatschübungen nach der Natur' und dem 'Flimmerspiel dramatischer Ausdrücke' befreit hat und anstatt bloß 'sorgfältig einer neben dem anderen und einer unter dem anderen aufgereihete Sätze' anzuhäufen, das Wort zurückerobert. Der Dichter soll 'SCHREIBEN' statt 'beschreiben'. Die engagierte Konzentration auf das Wort, auf die Befreiung des Wortes aus dem Textzusammenhang entspricht dem Plädoyer Marinettis für 'parole in liberté'. Doesburgs Ziel ist jedoch die Konkretisierung der sprachlichen Elemente analog zur Konkretisierung der bildnerischen Mittel in der Malerei. 'HET WOORD ALS UITDRUKKINGSMATERIE' / Das Wort als Ausdrucksmaterie / lautet seine Forderung an die neue Qualität des Wortes, des 'befreiten' Wortes, das als typographische Gestaltung und als Lautwert neue Ausdrucksbereiche eröffnen soll: Das Wort erscheint von seiner spezifischen Bedeutung, von seiner

Previously, Hans Arp had already deployed the term ‘concretion’, in the sense of reification of ideas, in 1918 for his fine art productions. Van Doesburg emphasises: “Konkrete und nicht abstrakte Malerei, denn nichts ist wirklicher, als eine Linie, eine Farbe, eine Oberfläche.”¹⁶ He defines the basic principles of concrete art, which will later be taken up and radicalised by Max Bill, as follows: complete autonomy of the means and materials from representing anything apart from themselves, concretisation of ideas, rejection of lyricism, symbolism and subjectivity, emphasis on mathematical principles of construction and a general conceptual affinity to scientific and technological methods. Concrete is understood in the Hegelian sense as the opposite of abstract: abstract ideas or thoughts are to be given a concrete, physically perceptible gestalt, they are to be expressed and transformed into material matter. Van Doesburg writes:

Direkter, unmittelbarer Ausdruck geistiger Vorgänge zu sein, ist Aufgabe und Anliegen dieser Art von Kunst. [...] Parallelen findet der Künstler in den Bereichen von Technik und Wissenschaft, die in das Bild des exakten Gestalters einfließen. [...] Wir sind Maler, die zu denken und zu messen wagen [...] Wir arbeiten [...] mit den Größen der Mathematik (euklidisch und nicht-euklidisch) und der Wissenschaft, das heißt mit den Mitteln des Denkens.¹⁷

Van Doesburg considers painting to be the direct translation of ideas into form. For him, painting is a carefully planned, rationally structured and highly formalised endeavour with its origin in thought, a conception which radically challenges the traditional notion of the painter as genius creating out of an intuitive, emotional urge. The painter here is regarded as a logical thinker deploying methods of mathematics and science. A pictorial element, and indeed the picture itself, has no other significance than itself, van Doesburg writes.

Max Bill, the Swiss sculptor, architect, painter, critic and founder and rector of the ‘Hochschule für Gestaltung’ in Ulm, for whom Gomringer worked as secretary from

Kontextbedeutung abgelöst als graphische oder lautliche Materialität.” Christina Weiss, *SEH-TEXTE. Zur Erweiterung des Textbegriffes in konkreten und nach-konkreten visuellen Texten*. Nürnberg: Institut für moderne Kunst, 1984, pp. 55-56.

¹⁶ Theo van Doesburg, “das manifest der konkreten kunst”. In: Margit Staber and Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft Verwaltungsabteilung des Stadtpräsidenten (eds), *konkrete kunst. 50 jahre entwicklung*. Zürich: Helmhaus Zürich, 1960, p. 23.

¹⁷ Quoted from Oliver Herwig, *Wortdesign. Eugen Gomringer und die bildende Kunst*. Munich: Iudicium, 2001, pp. 82-83.

1954 to 1958, uses van Doesburg's notion as a starting point and elaborates the concept of concrete art further in 1936. He becomes the most important theoretician and exponent of concrete art after the war. Bill writes: "Konkrete Kunst macht den 'abstrakten Gedanken an sich' mit rein künstlerischen Mitteln sichtbar und schafft zu diesem Zweck neue Gegenstände."¹⁸ A work of concrete art, according to Bill's aesthetics, is characterised by two aspects above all: complete autonomy of its formal means from representational tasks and a socio-utopian agenda in which art is considered as part of a wider strategy of a rational and positive transformation of the environment and society, as part of a scheme of "universale Umweltgestaltung".

Concrete art as defined by Bill is built according to its own means and its own corpus of internal laws of composition only. In contrast to abstract art, it is not based on, or derived from, physical reality at all, but constitutes from the very beginning an autonomous aesthetic *Eigenwelt* which refers to itself alone. Will Grohman points out: "bill nennt seine bilder und plastiken seit 1936 konkret, nicht abstrakt, und das ist richtig, da es sich nicht um abstrahierungen, sondern um setzungen handelt."¹⁹ The focus in concrete art is exclusively on material and formal features such as structural organisation, principles of composition and the physically perceptible qualities of the material itself. Bill writes:

konkrete gestaltung ist jene gestaltung, welche aus ihren eigenen mitteln und gesetzen entsteht, ohne diese aus äußeren naturerscheinungen ableiten oder entlehnen zu müssen. die optische gestaltung beruht somit auf farbe, form, raum, licht, bewegung.²⁰

Concrete art is conceived according to highly formalised and rational principles of construction. It utilises mathematical procedures, aspires to scientific objectivity and qualities such as precision, clarity, method and exact construction. Bill accentuates a general affinity to the machine aesthetics of the times by advocating the introduction of scientific and technological methods into the realm of art, explicitly declaring mathematical procedures and tenets, such as theory of combination, permutation,

¹⁸ Quoted from Margit Staber, "Werktypen, Begriffe und Wirkungen ... Einige Feststellungen...". In: *The Non-Objective World 1914-1955/ Die Gegenstandslose Welt 1914-1955*. London: Annelly Juda Fine Art, 1973, p. 8.

¹⁹ Will Grohman, "über max bill". In: Franz Larese and Jürg Janett (eds.), *Max Bill*. St. Gallen: Galerie im Erker St. Gallen, 1967, p.29.

²⁰ Quoted from Oliver Herwig, *Wortdesign. Eugen Gomringer und die bildende Kunst*, p. 86.

stochastic and aleatoric principles as well as serial construction, as structural models. Bill maintains that his art is designed to bridge the gap between the increasingly more complicated technological and scientific times and art:

solche neue ausdrucksformen, die in einer zeit, die hochgradig verwissenschaftlicht ist, neu entstehen, sind für viele betrachter beunruhigend und lösen nicht immer zustimmung aus. und dennoch sind gerade solche neu hinzukommende, für die zeit typische ausdrucksformen nötig, um eine brücke zu schlagen zwischen der nicht mehr überblickbaren welt von wissenschaft und technik und dem menschen mit seinem bedürfnis nach etwas anschaulichem, das trotz seiner neuheit – vielleicht gerade deshalb – zum symbol werden kann für die neue zeit.²¹

In keeping with van Doesburg, Bill considers concrete art as a radicalisation of abstract art. In concrete art, abstract ideas, thoughts and principles are to be concretised into perceptible and concrete physical shapes and structures. Bill defines concrete as “das wirkliche, das vorhandene, sichtbare und greifbare objekt. abstrakte ideen, verhältnisse, gedanken sichtbar zu machen, das ist konkretion.”²² The elements of concrete art are colours, light, movement, volume and space, and by means of forming these constituents according to rational thought, the artist creates not only new objects, but also new realities. Oliver Herwig writes:

Mit der kompromißlosen Absage an traditionelle Bildinhalte und ihrer Transformation in planvolle, auf mathematischer Basis geschaffene Arbeiten wird [...] eine Position geschaffen, von der aus das verwaiste Zentrum der künstlerischen Auseinandersetzung selbst produktiv wird: als Ort, an dem die der Kunst eigenen Mittel und Methoden erprobt werden und schließlich in Reinform zur Darstellung kommen. Folglich stellt sich die Konkrete Kunst bevorzugt als Struktur dar, gemäß dem Diktum Richard Paul Lohses, “die Methode ist das Bild”.²³

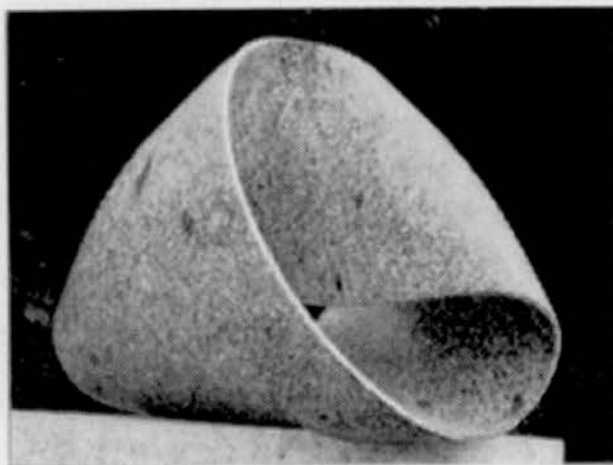
Bill’s sculpture “Unendliche Schleife” embodies many of the characteristics of concrete art: it is the concretion of a mathematical idea, the principle of the *Möbiusband*. The granite ribbon seems to consist of surface only, and thus constitutes a logical paradox for the viewer. It signifies solely itself: a rationally

²¹ Max Bill, “wie sieht die kunst aus um das jahr 2000?”. In: *Max Bill*, pp. 43-44.

²² Max Bense, “aspekte hegels in einer ausstellung von max bill”. In: *Max Bill*, p.37.

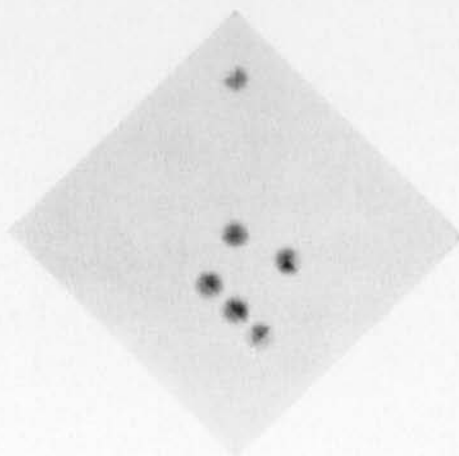
²³ Quoted from Oliver Herwig, *Worddesign. Eugen Gomringer und die bildende Kunst*, p. 102.

structured object emphasising its concrete materiality – shape, matter and principle of construction.



Max Bill, "Unendliche Schleife", 1935-1953

The kinship between concrete art and concrete poetry is particularly visible in Bill's "Akzente aus sechs Zonen" from 1955. Here, six rectangular elements are arranged on a cream-coloured background. Their spatial positions, the structural tension and potential relationships between the autonomous elements are reminiscent of Gomringer's constellations made up of linguistic elements.



Max Bill, "Akzente aus Sechs Zonen", 1955

The second important aspect of concrete art which made an impact on Gomringer's poetics is its claim to be a functional object for spiritual use, a "geistiger Gebrauchsgegenstand". Bill writes: "das ziel der konkreten kunst ist es, gegenstände für den geistigen gebrauch zu entwickeln, ähnlich wie der mensch sich gegenstände schafft für den materiellen gebrauch."²⁴ This is clearly the Bauhaus spirit shining through. From 1927-1929, Bill was a student at the Bauhaus himself, and studied under amongst others Albers, Kandinsky, Klee and Moholy-Nagy. His aesthetic conceptions are decidedly shaped by this experience: art for Bill is part of a wider universal "Umweltgestaltungsphilosophie".

Essentially, Bill wants to extend the rational structural laws at work in concrete art and apply them to the environment and society as well, as Herwig points out:

In einem zweiten Schritt, der allumfassenden 'Umweltgestaltung', werden die absoluten, 'reinen', da rationalen Gestaltungsmuster aus dem zweckfreien Raum der Kunst entlassen. Allumfassend sollten fortan Umwelt und Gesellschaft strukturiert rational durchformt werden.²⁵

Art here serves as prototype, as model, in which more universally applicable principles are tested and effectuated. Concrete art, declares Bill, has an exemplary dimension and takes an active stance towards the events of the day by means of advocating general laws of rationality, harmony and structure:

in diesem sinne stellt sich die konkrete kunst aktiv zum zeitgeschehen. sie strebt nach gesetz, vorbild und harmonie. sie strebt zu absoluter klarheit, zur gesetzmässigkeit und damit zur realität selber.²⁶

Bill's objectives, as those of most avant-gardists, are highly utopian and aim at a general transformation of culture by means of "Umwelt- und Produktgestaltung" in the sense of the Bauhaus. The functional, rational and structural laws at work in the art objects are to be models for a functional and rationally structured society:

²⁴ Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁶ Eugen Gomringer, "weshalb wir unsere dichtung 'konkrete dichtung' nennen". In: Eugen Gomringer, *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954 – 1997*. Wien: edition splitter, 1998, p. 33.

und von diesen so entstandenen kunstwerken her die in der dem künstler eigenen fähigkeit der konzentration auf einen neuen ausdruck geschaffen werden, gehen einflüsse auf die übrige gestaltung der umwelt aus. so schafft die kunst kriterien, die allein schon durch ihre existenz stilbildend werden, das heißt einfluß ausüben auf alles, was unserer umgebung neu hinzugefügt wird.²⁷

The aesthetics of concrete art are to be of major importance for the aesthetics of concrete poetry, especially in Gomringer's poetic framework.

6.3 Pound and Fenollosa: Concretion and the Ideogram

Interestingly, however, it was the scholar Ernest Fenollosa who, as early as 1908, deployed the term 'concrete' for the first time in an art and literature context in his essay "The Chinese written character as a medium for poetry", published by Ezra Pound in 1920.²⁸ Fenollosa's conception of the concreteness of Chinese poetry and his notion of the ideogram were to be of vital importance for Pound's own poetics, and Pound in turn was to become one of the major literary models for the Brazilian *Noigandres* group.

Fenollosa was presumably the first to ever speak of concrete poetry. Fenollosa argues that the Chinese character is a stylised, semi-pictorial depiction of concepts, with no basis in sound. Chinese characters indicate the idea of a thing without referring to the sounds of the spoken word – the written language is entirely independent from the spoken one. Moreover, the characters are concrete and not abstract because they have a pictorial origin, which has, however, become rather blurred, since the characters have become increasingly stylised with time and developed a graphic life of their own. Also, Chinese works via analogy and metaphor: for abstract concepts such as brightness, the ideogram of concrete objects symbolising these qualities is depicted – in the case of brightness or luminosity for example, the Chinese written character is a combination of the symbols for sun and moon. "Thus you write literally, 'the sun and the moon of the cup' for 'the cup's brightness'", maintains Fenollosa. "Placed as a

²⁷ Max Bill, "wie sieht die kunst aus um das jahr 2000?", p. 44.

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of that essay and its importance for the *Noigandres* group in particular see chapter 2.5.

verb, you write ‘the cup sun-and-moons’ [...].”²⁹ The character for “to be” and “to have” is even more poetic:

In Chinese the chief verb for ‘is’ not only means actively ‘to have,’ but shows by its derivation that it expresses something even more concrete, namely ‘to snatch from the moon with the hand.’ [The character for “is” and “to have” does indeed combine the symbol for the moon and for the hand.] Here the baldest symbol of prosaic analysis is transformed by magic into a splendid flash of concrete poetry.³⁰

The Chinese ideogram, Fenollosa argues, is by its very nature poetic, due to its deployment of both real and mental images and its metaphoric-analogical qualities: often a thing, idea or action is referred to by a word or expression denoting another thing, idea or action, suggesting a shared quality. It is concrete in the sense that it is a stylised pictorial representation of concrete things, ideas or actions, which are often used metaphorically in place of abstract qualities associated with them. It thus contrasts sharply with the Roman written alphabet, which is arbitrary, abstract and based on a representation of sounds.

Moreover, the Chinese ideograms “know no grammar”, they “show little or no variation in form for grammatical purposes”.³¹ Chinese offers an example of relational syntax. The ideograms are “round and adaptable like wheels” – the very quality that the Italian Futurists aspired to in their *parole in libertà*:

[The Chinese character is] not exclusive of parts of speech, but comprehensive; not something which is neither a noun, verb, nor adjective, but something which is all of them at once and at all times. Usage may incline the full meaning now a little more to one side, now to another, according to the point of view, but through all cases the poet is free to deal with it richly and concretely, as does nature.³²

²⁹ Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese written character as a medium for poetry*. Edited by Ezra Pound. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1936, p. 18. Cf. also R.L. Trask: “[...] Chinese does not provide a separate character for every word. There is a character for the word *hǔo* ‘fire’ and another for the word *chē* ‘vehicle’, but the word for ‘train’, *hǔochē*, literally ‘fire-vehicle’, is simply written with a combination of these two characters.” R. L. Trask, *Key Concepts in Language and Linguistics*. London; New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 346.

³⁰ Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese written character as a medium for poetry*, p. 15.

³¹ R. L. Trask, *Key Concepts in Language and Linguistics*, p. 345.

³² Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese written character as a medium for poetry*, p. 18.

Pound was profoundly inspired by Fenollosa's ideas about the ideographic and concrete nature of Chinese written characters. In fact, the ideogrammatic method was to become one of the major techniques in his perhaps most famous work, the *Cantos*, which are marked by collage-like juxtapositions of seemingly incompatible facts, which nevertheless point to an analogy of structure. As Hugh Kenner has pointed out: "The Chinese ideograph, like the metaphor, deals in exceedingly condensed juxtapositions."³³ Kenner argues that the ideogram and the metaphor function almost identically, by drawing attention to and comparing seemingly dissimilar qualities of objects or actions, which, juxtaposed, illuminate one another in a way that can not be achieved by schematic presentation. Kenner writes: "The principle of the ideogrammatic method is simply that things explain themselves by the company they keep."³⁴ Fenollosa too emphasises the analogy between ideogram and metaphor, calling the latter "the use of material images to suggest immaterial relations".³⁵

One ideogram in particular seems to encapsulate one of the most vital pillars of Pound's poetics: the "Ching Ming" ideogram of clarification, which denotes the activity of calling things by their right names.³⁶ Throughout his oeuvre, as Kenner writes, Pound seems to be concerned with the idea of exact definition, with the *mot juste*, with clarity of thought. One of Pound's most important imagist credos was to avoid any superfluous words, any ornaments or decorative elements, and to use direct, condensed, reduced, stripped-down, bare images only. He also opposed the use of abstraction, and propagated the direct treatment of the thing.³⁷

Strikingly, this care for precise language, for accurate registration, observation and expression, has a political dimension in Pound's poetic framework, a notion which he based on a passage from the Confucian *Ta Hio*, which Pound translated himself:

³³ Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*. London: Faber and Faber, 1951, p. 89.

³⁴ Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*, p. 220.

³⁵ Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese written character as a medium for poetry*, p. 22.

³⁶ Kenner writes: "The left-hand component [of the "Ching Ming" ideogram], according to Pound, means 'Governor' (hitching-post or king-pin uniting various levels of being, ground and sky, perhaps); the right-hand component is the sign of the waning moon over the mouth: terminology drifting through successive phases and requiring to be re-aligned with fact." Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*, p. 38.

³⁷ Pound's famous metro poem illustrates this point: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd: Petals on a wet, black bough."

The men of old wanting to clarify and diffuse throughout the empire that light which comes from looking straight into the heart and then acting, first set up good government in their own states; wanting good government in their own states, they first established order in their own families; wanting order in the home, they first disciplined themselves; desiring self-discipline, they rectified their own hearts; and wanting to rectify their hearts, they sought precise verbal definitions of their inarticulate thoughts (the tones given off by the heart); wishing to attain precise verbal definitions, they set to extend their knowledge to the utmost. The completion of knowledge is rooted in sorting things into organic categories.³⁸

Literature and the maintenance and renewal of verbal tools, which is a prerequisite for clarity of thought, expression and communication, Pound argues, are of vital importance for the whole machinery of social and individual thought, and thus by implication for the state. In keeping with his dictum that artists are the antennae of the race, Pound argues: "When literature is not active; when the word is not constantly striving towards precision, the nation decays in its head."³⁹ This utterly serious attitude towards verbal precision, and the connection between exact communication and the functioning of human interaction and society in general is to a certain degree reminiscent of Khlebnikov, who argued that the word controls the brain, the brain controls the hands, and the hands control kingdoms.⁴⁰

The aspiration towards precision and exactitude leads to a constant search for new forms, and inventions of new verbal processes and techniques. Pound subscribes to a decidedly progressive notion of literature: he considers literature as a continuous evolution of form, constantly brought forward by a handful of literary "inventors" who find new processes. Crucially, the poets of the *Noigandres* group subscribe to a very similar model of literary history: they too believe in an evolution of form, and compile their own list of literary inventors who advanced the art of poetry by discovering new textual procedures. Pound, not surprisingly, was one of the key figures in their literary ancestry.

³⁸ Quoted from Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*, p. 37.

³⁹ Quoted from Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*, p. 42.

⁴⁰ Velimir Khlebnikov, "The Warrior of the Kingdom", p. 293.

7. GOMRINGER AND THE CONCRETE NEXUS

7.1 Points of Convergence: Concrete Art and Concrete Poetry

Concrete poetry's initially independent emergence at different places in the world at roughly the same time seems to support both the claim that it is a genuinely international movement as well as a discerning answer to a specific cultural climate, a movement born of the times and concerned with its specific phenomena – not unlike Constructivism. The Swiss-Bolivian poet Eugen Gomringer designates concrete poetry as “international – übernational” and observes that a certain spirit and atmosphere in which concrete poetry flowered could be found both in Europe and South-America:

ein bezeichnendes merkmall der existenznotwendigkeit der konkreten dichtung ist, dass gebilde [...] fast gleichzeitig in europa und südamerika auftauchten, dass die haltung, die solche gebilde entstehen und vertreten lässt, sich hier wie dort durchzusetzen begann.¹

Concrete poetry surfaced in Germany, Brazil, Austria, Sweden, Scotland and many other countries at more or less the same time. Most poets were initially unaware of each other, but were united by the fact that they artistically responded to a certain cultural climate, new technological developments, changes in the media landscape, new theories about language, signs and literature, and developments in the fine arts, and by the fact that they thoroughly explored and studied the works of the historical avant-garde, which caused them to embark on similar aesthetic explorations. At a later point, the concrete poets started to collaborate, to form alliances and to build up an international network of production and distribution which transcended the national and regional group structures.

Gomringer is the founding father of concrete poetry, and the advocate of its poetically most rigid and austere branch. Conspicuously, the key to understanding Gomringer's poetry, and many other concrete works, is the conceptual analogy to concrete art. Again, as in the historical avant-garde, but even more decidedly so, it is the structural and conceptual tenets and principles of the fine arts that serve as

¹ Eugen Gomringer, “konkrete dichtung”. In: Eugen Gomringer (ed.), *konkrete poesie deutschsprachiger autoren. anthologie*. Stuttgart: Phillipp Reclam Junior, 1972, p. 160.

models and inspirations for linguistic productions. As Oliver Herwig maintains: “Die Konkrete Poesie entspringt größtenteils einer Analogiebildung zu Prinzipien der Konkreten Kunst, deren rationale Arbeitsweise methodische Vorgaben lieferte.”² The name of the movement, agreed upon by Gomringer and Décio Pignatari in 1955 during a meeting at the ‘Hochschule für Gestaltung’ in Ulm, an important nexus where several of its most prominent practitioners encountered each other, already suggests the fine art connection, which Gomringer explicitly points out in many writings: “wir können in jenen frühen manifestationen der konkreten malerei eine wurzel unserer eigenen konkreten dichtung sehen.”³

Gomringer, by choosing the term concrete for his poetic productions, explicitly emphasises his affiliation to and alliance with a broader programme, “zu einer mit ernst überlegten neuorientierung in der beziehung kunst/leben/wissenschaft”.⁴ The conceptual convergences of concrete art and concrete poetry are vital for the understanding of concrete poetry: “die konkrete poesie ist zwar eine dichterische strömung, sie ist jedoch ohne den bezug zur konkreten kunst [...] nicht denkbar.”⁵

Above all, Gomringer appropriates three major concepts from Bill’s theoretical corpus and transfers them to the realm of poetry: the notion of the autonomy of the material, an emphasis on the methodological, rational and structured principles of construction, and the notion of art as an object for spiritual use.⁶

Gomringer, like Bill, does no longer consider mimesis or representation to be the adequate task of modern art or poetry. He defines the new challenge as the creation of an autonomous linguistic reality, in which the perceptual qualities of the signifiers rather than merely the signifieds themselves are emphasised. Herwig writes: “das Gewicht [wird] verlagert auf die Seite der Signifikanten, die Präsentation von Sprache statt der Repräsentation von Wirklichkeit.”⁷ The constellation “ist eine realität an sich und kein gedicht über”, maintains Gomringer.⁸ In keeping with a

² Oliver Herwig, *Worddesign. Eugen Gomringer und die bildende Kunst*, p. 49.

³ Eugen Gomringer, “weshalb wir unsere dichtung ‘konkrete dichtung’ nennen”, p. 33.

⁴ Eugen Gomringer, “weshalb wir unsere dichtung ‘konkrete dichtung’ nennen”, p. 34.

⁵ Eugen Gomringer, “konkrete poesie und zero”. In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954 – 1997*, p. 115.

⁶ The importance of Bill’s socio-political vision is discussed explicitly below in chapter 1.5.

⁷ Oliver Herwig, *Worddesign. Eugen Gomringer und die bildende Kunst*, p. 42.

⁸ Eugen Gomringer, “vom vers zur konstellation. zweck und form einer neuen dichtung”. In: *konkrete poesie deutschsprachiger autoren. anthologie*, p. 158.

dominant strand within the avant-garde tradition, he refrains from the depiction of external or internal reality, narrative and description. His constellations are self-referential linguistic constructs, rationally structured word constellations, not poems about something but concrete realities in themselves. However, Gomringer does not abandon the semantic dimension of language. Therefore, the material he deals with is never quite as autonomous as the truly abstract material which forms the basis of concrete art. Gomringer maintains:

[es] ist sodann zu bemerken, dass wir es nicht als moderne künstlerische aufgabe betrachten, in der welt und ihren erscheinungen uns gegenüberstehende objekte zu sehen und diese zu beschreiben, zu besingen oder zu beschimpfen. nein, wir ahnen, spüren und glauben zu wissen, dass wir uns mit der realität nur unterhalten können, indem wir selber realität herstellen, eine eigene künstlerische realität, um [...] die realität besser zu verstehen, um in ihr zu sein und auch um sie zu vermitteln auf dem weg über die analogie.⁹

Structure, method, objectivity, and the application of mathematical principles are as important to concrete poetry as to concrete art, Gomringer writes: “man erkennt, dass die kombinatorik ein hilfsmittel der konstellation ist: ein direkterer einfluss auf die dichtung war der mathematik nie möglich.”¹⁰

7.2 Literary Ancestry: The Avant-Garde Tradition

Additionally to the fine art model there are literary precursors. Gomringer, as well as the *Noigandres* group, acknowledges his literary forerunners and delineates the modernist-avant-garde ancestry that he draws upon in various manifestos. Amongst those he most frequently mentions are Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Arno Holz, as well as e. e. cummings and William Carlos Williams.¹¹ Ball is named, as are the Futurists and, with reservations, the Dadaists in general.

Gomringer and the other concrete poets find themselves in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, by declaring themselves as avant-garde, the concrete poets implicitly claim the values that come with this label: the radical rupture and break with tradition and the notion of venturing forth into unknown poetic territory. Yet on

⁹ Eugen Gomringer, “weshalb wir unsere dichtung ‘konkrete dichtung’ nennen”, p. 34.

¹⁰ Eugen Gomringer, “vom vers zur konstellation. zweck und form einer neuen dichtung”, p. 158.

¹¹ Cf. Eugen Gomringer, “weshalb wir unsere dichtung ‘konkrete dichtung’ nennen”, p. 34.

the other hand, they openly acknowledge and draw upon literary models and hence accept their indebtedness to an existing tradition. Gomringer's attitude towards this problem is ambiguous: in "eigentlich nicht", he claims not to have been aware of Dada when he composed his first constellations.¹² Conversely, in another text, he is keen to emphasise and explicitly recognise what he owes to the literary historical avant-garde: namely the liberation of the word from syntactical structures, reduction, the discovery of the expressive force of typography and the exploration of the sensually perceptible features of the language material.¹³ He also observes "dass diese dichtung damit zum parallellfall eines in der bildenden kunst bekannten vorgangs wurde (kandinsky, klee, mondrian)", which constitutes yet another parallel to his own work. This affiliation with the fine arts, argues Gomringer, proves the involvement of the historical avant-garde poets in a broader, more general process, "dem grossen reinigungsprozess, der da wie dort die elemente des aufbaus neu entdecken lies."¹⁴ Gomringer names language dissection, the act of cutting and separating words from their respective contexts in order to explore their material dimension, as another shared key technique:

in der dichtung wurde das element "wort" neu entdeckt. die futuristische dichtung des kreises um marinetti, zum teil auch die expressionistische, ganz besonders aber die dadaistische dichtung erkannten und ergriffen das aus dem zusammenhang gelöste wort, unter anderem mit der bezeichnenden begründung – von hugo ball –, dass die besonderen umstände jener zeit eine begabung von rang nicht ruhen und reifen liessen, sondern auf die prüfung der mittel verwiesen.¹⁵

However, despite formal, aesthetic and interdisciplinary analogies, Gomringer points out that the motives and intentions for language dissection in concrete poetry differ from those in the historical avant-garde: "die weltanschauliche begründung und der

¹² Cf. Eugen Gomringer, "eigentlich nicht". In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954 – 1997*, p. 101.

¹³ Gomringer writes: "gewiss hatten sich in jedem jahrhundert, zuletzt im symbolismus, im jugendstil, im expressionismus und bei dada, immer wieder poeten für die erscheinungsbilder der sprache, für den sprachleib, interessiert. auf dieser entwicklungslinie [...] galt es nun weiterzuschreiten: es galt den rahmen zu öffnen und sich in die weltweiten visualisierungstendenzen einzugliedern, wenn nicht gar, diese zu beeinflussen. ich glaube, dass dies weitgehend gelungen ist. der poet – ich spreche nun vom konkreten dichter – ist nicht nur beim grafiker und typografen in die schule gegangen, er hat diese umgekehrt auch beeinflusst." Eugen Gomringer, "poesie als mittel der umweltgestaltung". In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954 – 1997*, p. 65.

¹⁴ Eugen Gomringer, "vom vers zur konstellation. zweck und form einer neuen dichtung", p. 155.

¹⁵ Ibid.

ausdruckswille, der hinter dieser dichtung steht, sind uns nicht mehr zugehörig und sind nicht mehr zeitgemäss.”¹⁶ Gomringer is eager to defend himself against allegations of being a mere imitator, claiming that concrete poetry is produced in relation to the special circumstances of its own times, and involves new technological possibilities, such as stochastic, machine-determined poetry composition:

auch die futuristen und die dadaisten gehören zweifellos zu den vorbereitern der konkreten dichtung, wobei ich allerdings gleich mit entschiedenheit sagen muss, dass wir [...] unsere dichtung unter dem geistigen vorzeichen unserer eigenen zeit machen. [...] wir leben heute mit der möglichkeit, die wortselektion nach bestimmten programmgesteuerten mustern auf automatischem weg vorzunehmen und texte auf automatischem weg zusammenzusetzen. die eben genannten dichter, unsere wegbereiter, lebten dagegen zu einer zeit der prätechnischen kunst.¹⁷

Moreover, information about the historical avant-garde was not as easy to obtain in Germany in the early 1950s as it is today: many works were only printed in journals or as leaflets, some were lost, destroyed by the Nazis in the course of the degenerate art crusade, or out of print. Only gradually were they rediscovered and re-edited. Claus Clüver maintains that from our vantage point today, with our increased knowledge about the productions of the first half of the century, we are much more likely to “construct continuities and to connect a good portion of the Concrete project with major facets of the Modernist aesthetic.”¹⁸ Clüver emphasises that “Nazism’s persecution of ‘degenerate art’ and the general discontinuities caused by World War II had [...] kept young artists in Germany ignorant” about the avant-garde tradition:

We have already seen that information gaps caused by ideological suppression, war, geographic distance, and simple neglect by the mainstream culture gave poets involved in the Concrete poetry movement a sense of venturing into a poetic terra incognita that appears ungrounded, though understandable, in view of our much fuller knowledge of the wealth of activities by those “new poets” earlier in this century.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Eugen Gomringer, “weshalb wir unsere dichtung ‘konkrete dichtung’ nennen”, p. 34.

¹⁸ Claus Clüver, “Concrete poetry: critical perspectives from the 90s”. In: *Experimental – Visual – Concrete. Avant-garde Poetry since the 1960s*, p. 277.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 276-277.

Nevertheless, Dada and the avant-garde tradition find their way into, infiltrate and shape Gomringer's work through another channel for certain. Theo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters, both members of Dada Holland and *Merz* in the early 1920s, infused the aesthetic heritage of Dada into their gradually more constructivist ventures, which culminated in van Doesburg's first manifesto of concrete art in 1930, a major theoretical cornerstone for Bill's aesthetics, and hence a decisive inspiration for Gomringer's own oeuvre too. Bill, moreover, was in direct contact with many of the protagonists of the historical avant-garde, including not only Piet Mondrian and his teachers at the Bauhaus, but also Georges Vantongerloo, Arp and Schwitters himself, whom he encountered in the Paris-based group *Abstraction-Création*, with which he was involved from 1932 to 1936. These connections with avant-garde fine art practices undoubtedly had an impact on Gomringer's literary experiments.

7.3 Impacts from the Non-Aesthetic Communication Sphere: Technology and the Aesthetics of Advertisements

Being topical and keeping up with the developments and concerns of his own times was of major importance for Gomringer, just as it was for Hausmann. Indeed, Gomringer's claim that his poetry represents the language of the times and mirrors its dominant structural patterns of communication formally and substantially, as well as his assertion that he studied, annexed and appropriated forms from the non-aesthetic and technological communication sphere, were essentially strategies that aim at being representative of the current Zeitgeist.

Communication patterns in the early 1950s were changing drastically, Gomringer maintains: communication became quicker, swifter and more effective. Language was becoming more and more reduced, formally simplified and condensed:

unsere zeit spricht, wie jede zeit, ihre eigene sprache. [...] unsere sprachen befinden sich auf dem weg der formalen vereinfachung. es bilden sich reduzierte, knappe formen. [...] durch ihren modernen zeichencharakter hat sich [...] die schrift an die notwendigkeit der schnelleren kommunikation angepasst.²⁰

²⁰ Eugen Gomringer, "vom vers zur konstellation. zweck und form einer neuen dichtung", pp. 153-154.

Concentration and reduction, however, are always key concerns of poetry in general. In keeping with Ezra Pound's etymological observation "DICHTEN = CONDENSARE", Gomringer argues:²¹ "[...] knappheit im positiven sinne – konzentration und einfachheit – sind das wesen der dichtung."²² These inherent qualities of poetic discourse are intensified and radicalised in concrete poetry. Moreover, concrete poetry shares its formal simplicity and essentially condensed nature with the language of the times: "daraus wäre zu schliessen, dass heutige sprache und dichtung gemeinsames haben müssten, dass sie einander formal und substantiell speisen würden."²³ To confirm this, Gomringer uses a quote from E. Colin Cherry, author of *A History of the Theory of Information*, as motto for his poetry collection *die konstellationen les constellations the constellations las constelaciones*, published in 1963. It reads:

'it is interesting to observe that as technical applications have increased in complexity with the passage of time, languages have increased in simplicity, until to-day we are considering the ultimate compression of information in the simplest possible forms.'²⁴

Gomringer claims that verse-based poetry has lost its grounding because it is divided from the language of real life and concerned with individual expressions only that have no relevance for society as a whole. "versdichtung", he alleges, is devoid of "ansprüche auf stellvertretung für zeitsprache und zeitgefühl".²⁵ Concrete poetry, in contrast, aims to be relevant and useful, and, in order to keep up with a world that becomes increasingly obsessed with new technologies, also draws on the functions and forms of non-aesthetic communication spheres. Gomringer is preoccupied with the impacts of technological changes on everyday life, just as the Futurists were. He aims at mirroring these changes formally within language, like Marinetti does too to a certain degree by aspiring to write like a telegraph: brief, swift, precise and economic.

²¹ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*. London: Faber and Faber, 1960, p. 36.

²² Eugen Gomringer, "vom vers zur konstellation. zweck und form einer neuen dichtung", pp. 153-154.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Quoted from Eugen Gomringer, *die konstellationen les constellations the constellations las constelaciones*. Frauenfeld Schweiz: eugen gomringer press, 1963, on inside of cover page.

²⁵ Eugen Gomringer, "vom vers zur konstellation. zweck und form einer neuen dichtung", p. 154.

wer heute in die gelebte welt sieht, wird häufig reduzierten, auf wesentliches beschränkten kommunikationssystemen begegnen. Es lässt sich in der tat feststellen, dass die sprache, befehle und antworten umso einfacher werden, je komplizierter der technische apparat wird. um seinen anteil an der technischen welt zu bewahren, kann ein dichter die konsequenz ziehen, funktionen und formen der nicht-ästhetischen kommunikationswelt zu studieren, zu prüfen und sich adäquat, das heisst in der gleichen sprache, auszudrücken, dabei jedoch sein dichten und trachten an einer ästhetischen ordnung zu orientieren.²⁶

Gomringer's poetry is conceived of as a conceptual analogy to abbreviated technical languages based on command and response patterns. He also emphasises the formal kinship between concrete poetry and the increasingly cut-down and simplified nature of information circulated in mass media, like the headline:

mit der konstellation wollte ich hinweisen auf die formale verwandschaft reduzierter gedichttexte mit kurzen informationen nicht-ästhetischer art. ich wollte eine art analogie herstellen zwischen der gerafften nachricht, wie sie der schnell-leser heute schätzt, und der knappen, von aller umständlichkeit befreiten lyrischen information.²⁷

Again, as in the historical avant-garde, changes in the public sphere such as an increasing emphasis on the visual, evident in bill boards, glossy magazines, and a drastic increase in advertisements as a result of a rapidly growing consumer culture, have a profound impact on poetic productions: headlines, advertisements and industrial design function both formally and conceptually as aesthetic models for the new poetry. "werbegrafik und typografie begannen auf die tägliche umgebung sowohl des einzelnen als auch des menschen in der masse einfluss zu nehmen", writes Gomringer, and: "[...] das plakat, der prospekt, die anzeige, kampfmittel der freien marktwirtschaft, lieferten gleichsam gratis ästhetik mit [...]".²⁸ Visual communication becomes increasingly important both in the world of advertising and in concrete poetry, because it can be apprehended instantaneously: "kein zweifel, dass das vermittelnde organ für literatur immer mehr das auge ist [...]. die rolle der

²⁶ Eugen Gomringer, "mist - mountain - butterfly". In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954 - 1997*, pp. 44-45.

²⁷ Eugen Gomringer, "die konstellation. eine neue gedichtform". In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954 - 1997*, pp. 46-47.

²⁸ Eugen Gomringer, "poesie als mittel zur umweltgestaltung", p. 64.

typografie als medium der literatur ist deshalb nicht zu unterschätzen.”²⁹ Poetry too is to aspire to the aesthetics of headlines.

Gomringer’s concrete poetry is thus not only vitally inspired by concrete art, the avant-garde and modernist tradition, strategies of the technological communication sphere and the aesthetics of advertisements and headlines, but also claims to take into account developments in a whole range of other fields in a truly interdisciplinary spirit:

somit möchte die konkrete dichtung – und also auch die konstellation – eine art literatur sein, die mit dem literaturbetrieb weniger zu tun hat als mit den entwicklungen auf den gebieten der architektur, der malerei und plastik, der produktgestaltung, der industriellen organisation, mit entwicklungen also, denen ein kritisches, doch positives denken zugrunde liegt.³⁰

7.4 Shapes and Forms of Concrete Poetry: Constellations and Ideograms

Like the protagonists of the first avant-garde, most concrete poets embarked on the venture of self-publication and established their own distribution apparatuses, mostly in the form of literary magazines and journals. Many of them also acted as chroniclers of their own movement, not only relentlessly assessing the concrete poetics and works in numerous self-reflective essays, manifestos and reviews, but also by means of documenting, collecting, publishing and editing the works of fellow concrete poets.³¹

In 1953, Gomringer, Marcel Wyss and Diter Rot founded the literary magazine “spirale”, which was issued until 1964, and Gomringer set up the “spiral press”, later renamed “eugen gomringer press”, financed by himself. In 1953 he also published his first volume of concrete poetry, *konstellationen constellations constellaciones*, in a circulation of 150 copies. However, Gomringer was admitted into the official German cultural apparatus sixteen years later: the renowned publishing house Rowohlt printed his collected works in 1969, and in 1972, Gomringer edited the

²⁹ Eugen Gomringer, “die konkrete poesie als übernationale sprache”. In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954 – 1997*, pp. 46-47

³⁰ Eugen Gomringer, “das gedicht als gebrauchsgegenstand”. In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954 – 1997*, p. 31.

³¹ Three of the most important anthologies of concrete poetry were edited by concrete poets themselves: Stephen Bann’s *Concrete Poetry: an international anthology* and Emmett William’s *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* from 1967, as well as Mary Ellen Solt’s *Concrete Poetry: A World View* from 1970.

Phillip Reclam jun. anthology *konkrete poesie deutschsprachiger autoren. anthologie*, which is still a standard and widely available collection. About fifteen years after the emergence of concrete poetry, a growing public interest became manifest in a wave of anthologies, exhibitions and publications of collected works. Reinhard Döhl's "Apfel" and Ernst Jandl's "ottos mops" even found their way into German schoolbooks.³²

The 'constellation' is Gomringer's chief poetic invention and major contribution, named in homage to Mallarmé, whose "Un Coup de Dés" can be considered one of the master-texts for concrete poets due to its introduction of the conceptual deployment of space.³³ The constellation embodies some of the key characteristics of concrete poetry: the linguistic material is radically reduced to a few condensed elements, which are arranged so that the analysis of their structural relations constitutes the poetic challenge. The poems are built with a limited number of words, mostly nouns of a non-specific, general nature, which are positioned on the page, dissected and isolated from the framework of grammatical or syntactical hierarchies, and given a "gedanklich-stoffliche beziehung".³⁴ Any context is radically omitted. Most of them even lack a title. Gomringer defines constellations as "ordnungseinheit, in welcher anzahl und position der worte wie auch die zeit bestimmende faktoren sind."³⁵ Other key characteristics of the constellation are:

unmittelbare juxtaposition von worten, repetition und kombinatorik, in frage gestellte äquivalenz von aussagen, allgemeine verbindlichkeit der themata, analyse und synthese als gedicht-gegenstand, minimal-maximal spannungen auf kleinstem raum [...].³⁶

Insistent repetition, maintains Gomringer, serves the purpose of drawing attention to the material, "bewirkt verharren und momentane konzentration wie auch ein plötzliches bewusstwerden der besonderheiten einer bestimmten wortmaterie."³⁷

³² Now, however, most anthologies and other publications are out of print, have not been re-edited and are increasingly hard to find.

³³ Gomringer quotes Mallarmé in his manifesto "vom vers zur konstellation. zweck und form einer neuen dichtung": "rien n'aura lieu/exepté/peut-être/une constellation". In: *ibid.*, p. 153.

³⁴ Eugen Gomringer, "vom vers zur konstellation. zweck und form einer neuen dichtung", p. 157.

³⁵ Eugen Gomringer, "gedichttechnik". In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954 – 1997*, p. 21.

³⁶ Eugen Gomringer, "das gedicht als gebrauchsgegenstand", p. 31.

³⁷ Eugen Gomringer, "gedichttechnik", p. 21.

Syntax is radically reduced, if not entirely abandoned. As a result, certain word classes, like linking devices, become redundant and are regularly omitted, which is distinctly reminiscent of the Futurists' *parole in libertà* tenets. The arrangement and juxtaposition of words is the vital moment here: whether they are presented isolated or combined, in pairs or in linear sequences, all attention is directed to their positional value on the page as well as to their material qualities and possible semantic connections. Gomringer defines concrete poetry as "bewusste beobachtung des materials und seiner struktur", whereas material is identified as "summe aller zeichen, mit denen wir dichten".³⁸ The word, maintains Gomringer,

besteht aus lauten, aus buchstaben, von denen einzelne einen individuellen, markanten ausdruck besitzen. es eignet dem wort die schönheit des materials und die abenteuerlichkeit des zeichens.³⁹

baum
baum kind

kind
kind hund

hund
hund haus

haus
haus baum

baum kind hund haus

Eugen Gomringer, "baum kind hund haus", 1952

"baum kind hund haus" is one of the earliest concrete poems: it was written in 1952, and published in the volume *konstellationen constellations constelaciones* in 1953. It

³⁸ Eugen Gomringer, "das gedicht als gebrauchsgegenstand", p. 30.

³⁹ Eugen Gomringer, "vom vers zur konstellation. zweck und form einer neuen dichtung", p. 157.

consists of nine left-aligned lines, of which eight are divided into four stanza-like pairs. They each feature a single word in the first line and a combination of the single word with a new term in the second, which in turn serves as the next single word in the subsequent sequence. The last word of the fourth pair repeats the first word of the poem, which gives it a circular structure. The final line linearly strings together all the elements featured in the previous lines, in the sequence of their initial appearance “baum kind hund haus”. The organisational scheme of the poem can hence be specified as a/ab//b/bc//c/cd//d/da//abcd.

Formally, the nouns are united by being monosyllabic and written in lower case letters. Dark and lighter vowels alternate with each other: “baum/baum kind; kind/kind hund; hund/hund haus”. In the first stanza, the vowels seem to jump from one far-end place of articulation to its most opposite counterpart: “a” is an open vowel, “u” is a closed back-vowel, and they are contrasted with the closed front-vowel “i” on the other end of the cardinal vowel pitch. The phonetic parameters of place and manner of articulation are thus subtly brought to the attention of the recipient.

The nouns designate abstract and general rather than specific phenomena, in keeping with Gomringer’s maxim “allgemeine verbindlichkeit der themata”. Gomringer consequently chooses “baum” and not oak, pine-tree or birch, and he does not specify the gender of the child, nor the breed of the dog, or the architecture of the house. The terms denote general concepts of a broad semantic scope – they are all at the top of paradigmatic pyramids, umbrella terms for phenomena that could be specified in much greater detail. The advantage of this vagueness is that the imaginary scope of the recipient is not restricted or directed in great detail: the poet roughly defines verbal parameters, but the recipient has to fill in the blanks within these given parameters. Gomringer often emphasises the play-activity inherent in his constellations: “die konstellation ist eine ordnung und zugleich ein spielraum mit festen grössen.”⁴⁰ He continues:

die konstellation wird vom dichter gesetzt. er bestimmt den spielraum, das kräftefeld und deutet seine möglichkeiten an. der leser, der neue leser, nimmt den spielsinn auf und mit sich [...].

⁴⁰ Ibid.

The poet selects and arranges the words in what is a more or less open structure. The task of association and of relating the elements to each other, however, is left to the recipient, who is forced into an active position and needs to complete the poem, by choosing one or more of the several possibilities to link the building blocks of the poem to each other. The *Leerstellen* need to be filled: possible syntactical structures have to be imagined and re-established.

The semantic dimension is not at all abandoned or neglected here, as in some of the Dadaists' works, but the semantic, the visual and the acoustic dimensions are exploited respectively and co-exist. Gomringer explicitly states that he always intended to retain the semantic dimension: he finds it more rewarding "am wort zu bleiben, ja sogar den üblichen durchschnittlichen wortsinn beizubehalten."⁴¹ Indeed, the terms are not just united by being monosyllabic, but there is some suggestion of coherence on the content level as well: one could interpret "baum kind hund haus" as a depiction of a family idyll – a child playing with a dog in a garden with a tree – or one could consider more general categories, like nature, mankind, the animal kingdom and shelter, security and home, and reflect upon their interrelatedness. Gomringer writes: "'baum' steht für verwurzelte natur, 'kind' für mensch, 'hund' für tier und 'haus' für gestaltung und kunstwerk."⁴²

The formal structure of the poem is rigidly methodological: combination and permutation are the major principals of construction. The elements are submitted to a process of systematic re-grouping. In "baum kind hund haus", a limited set of elements is permuted according to a rational principle, and the method of construction exposes itself self-consciously in the structure of the constellation. This constructivist vigour is in keeping both with the major tenets of concrete art, which also places emphasis on structure, method and mathematical principles, as well as with a general desire to aspire to the rational and effective organisation of information in the natural sciences or technological spheres. The constellation "ist in der naturwissenschaftlich-technischen weltanschauung von heute begründet und wird

⁴¹ Eugen Gomringer, "das gedicht als gebrauchsgegenstand", p. 30.

⁴² Eugen Gomringer, "charakteristika der gebräuchlichsten formen der konkreten poesie". In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954–1997*, p. 120.

sich in einer synthetisch-rationalistischen weltanschauung von morgen entfalten",
writes Gomringer.⁴³

das schwarze geheimnis
ist **hier**
hier **ist**
das schwarze geheimnis

Eugen Gomringer, "das schwarze geheimnis"

Gomringer's assertion that concrete poetry is not poetry about something or other, but a reality in itself, that it refers above all to its own linguistic condition, that it communicates its structure and the material qualities of its signs, is perhaps best exemplified by "das schwarze geheimnis". The words "das schwarze geheimnis" feature in lines 1 and 4, line 2 accommodates "ist hier" and line 3 contains the reversal "hier ist". The shape of the poem is rectangular due to a huge blank space in its centre. The twice repeated assertion "das schwarze geheimnis/ist hier/hier ist/das schwarze geheimnis", "the black secret/is here/here is/the black secret", constitutes a circular and highly self-referential structure. "schwarz" seems to allude to the colour of the ink, to the blackness of the letter-material which forms the poem, but the promised secret is not uncovered at first glance; in fact it seems to be missing. It appears to lie in the blank space surrounded by the words "ist hier" and "hier ist" – in the gap, in the spatial void between the words.

However, at second glance, this conclusion seems paradoxical, for the white space can hardly be the black secret. The secret, it becomes obvious, must be "hier", which is supported by the double meaning inherent in the grammatical structure of the sentence. "hier" could function as an adverbial demonstration of place, an articulation of presence, as a spatial specification of "ist", a determiner indicating a

⁴³ Eugen Gomringer, "konkrete dichtung". In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954–1997*, p. 160.

specific point in space, standing in for something else, pointing to something other than itself. In this sense, “hier” would perform the natural representative task of language, that is acting as *Stellvertreter*, as sign for an extra-linguistic phenomenon. Alternatively, as seems more sensible, “hier” could also be considered as pure linguistic material: it could be taken as concrete essence, not referring to anything at all apart from its texture, its elements of constitution, its visual and audible dimension. In this case, the signifier “hier” would incorporate the actual black secret, purposefully stating that the black ink and the concrete shape of the letters is really all there is in a circular self-referential gesture. This poem very subtly stages the difference between signifier and signified, the inherent tension between the autonomous material qualities of linguistic signs, which constitute a concrete material reality, and their referential dimension. “das schwarze geheimnis” poignantly illustrates the essence of the notion of concrete: concrete matter refers to nothing but itself, to the here and now, to the physical presence and perceptible qualities of language.

Another important form of concrete poetry is the ‘ideogram’: traditionally, an ideogram is a character symbolising the idea of a thing without indicating the sounds used to say it, such as numerals or the Chinese written characters. Gomringer’s notion of the ideogram is similar: in an ideogram, the linguistic elements of a word are spatially arranged and provide the term with a poignant visual shape. Gomringer defines the ideogram as “sehtext, mit dessen hilfe ein begriff (ein abstraktum) eine einprägsame, unveränderbare, sichtbare gestalt erhält.”⁴⁴ This definition is very reminiscent of the principle of “concretion” of abstract ideas, as defined by the concrete artists. An ideogram is built by means of the functional arrangement of the linguistic elements of a term, “und zwar so, dass deren strukturelle verknüpfung den begriff erkennbar bildlich darstellt.”⁴⁵ The conceptual deployment of space is one of the major poetic means of the ideogram.

⁴⁴ Eugen Gomringer, “charakteristika der gebräuchlichsten formen der konkreten poesie”, p. 118.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

w w
 d i
 n n n
 i d i d
w w

Eugen Gomringer, "wind"

"wind" exemplifies many of the above-mentioned principles, and can, moreover, be considered as the effectuation of the Russian Cubo-Futurists' vision of the one-word-poem. The verbal constituents of "wind" are arranged spatially on the page; syntax as well as consecutive reading structures are omitted. Four "w"s and three versions each of the other letters are structurally juxtaposed, and their combination and synthesis constitutes the poetic subject. The concept of line is entirely abandoned: the structure is multi-linear and dynamic; multiple possible paths between the text segments exist. In the process of reception, reading and perceiving alternate, the eye has to travel and stay in constant motion. The word "wind" can be assembled in numerous different combinations derived from the given set of elements. Here, structure and meaning determine each other: movement is not only literally required by the recipient, but is also poetically evoked. Mary Ellen Solt states that the multi-linear arrangement captures the nature of wind far more truly than a longer poetic statement would be able to: "The letters actually seem to float as if the wind were acting upon them", she writes.⁴⁶

"silencio", written in 1954, operates, like "das schwarze geheimnis", with an empty space within: three "silencio"s per line feature in lines 1, 2, 4 and 5. In line 3, the "silencio" in the centre is omitted, leaving a significant gap: the meditative repetition of the word "silence" becomes significant only by being interrupted with and

⁴⁶ Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, p. 9.

juxtaposed to actual silence.⁴⁷ It seems as if silence as a concept is expressed far better by the void of signification than by its actual signifier. Silence in the gap is not signified, but demonstrated.

silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio

Eugen Gomringer, "silencio", 1954

For silence, it becomes obvious, can only occur when nothing is spoken, or even written: even the graphic repetition of the signifier of the concept prevents its effectuation; true stillness lies only in the empty centre of the poem. Silence is not represented but shown, it is performed and realised. Here, Gomringer opts for the "leise sprache des schweigens oder vorzeigens", and the concept of communicating a "mitteilung eher in der form der unmittelbaren erleuchtung."⁴⁸ By doing so he sheds light on the very nature of signs and their representative function. Jacques Derrida has pointed out how, generally, signs are put in place of the thing itself: "Le signe représente le présent en son absence. Il en tient lieu."⁴⁹ He proposes:

Quand nous ne pouvons prendre ou montrer la chose, disons le présent, l'étant-présent, quand le présent ne se présente pas, nous signifions, nous passons par le détour du signe. Nous prenons ou donnons un signe. Nous faisons signe. Le signe serait donc la présence différée. [...] la circulation des signes diffère le moment où nous pourrions rencontrer la chose même, nous en emparer, la consommer ou la dépenser, la toucher, la voir, en avoir l'intuition présente.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ "silencio", as well as "das schwarze geheimnis" is one of many poems which Gomringer translated into other languages, there are French, German and English versions of the poem as well.

⁴⁸ Eugen Gomringer, "zweifel an der sprache". In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954 – 1997*, p. 92.

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, "La Différance". In: Philippe Sollers (ed.), *Théorie D'Ensemble*. Édition Du Seuil, 1968, p. 47.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Gomringer, however, confronts the sign with the thing itself, cunningly reversing the language-inherent process of substituting the sign for the thing: silence is present in the centre of the poem, starkly emphasising the contrast between the concept and its linguistic representation. On yet another level, in a concrete sense, language is not only a representative of an absent presence but a thing itself as well, like “hier” in “das schwarze geheimnis”.

Here, doubt is raised, trust in the language system is challenged and a reflection upon its adequacy provoked, for is it not strange that a gap represents a concept far more truly than the actual signifier of that concept? The persistent repetition of only one word not only directs all attention to its composition and material qualities, but it also provokes further reflections upon the relation between words and reality, their adequacy and the competence of signs to act as deputies for things. Gomringer writes:

wenn man sich so sehr auf ein einziges wort oder einige wenige wörter konzentriert, beginnt man vielleicht auch, sich gedanken darüber zu machen, inwieweit wörter eigentlich zuständig sind in unserer welt. sind wörter stellvertreter für vorgänge ohne wörter? lösen sie vorgänge aus? überhaupt, wie eng ist das band zwischen der sprache und der wirklichkeit, die ohne sprache wirkt? – es gehört zum sinn der konstellation, zweifel zu wecken an der scheinbar normalen funktion der sprache.⁵¹

7.5 The Critical Engagement of Concrete Poetry

In addition to the notion of the autonomy of the material and emphasis on rational principles of construction, concrete poetry and concrete art have another issue in common: their utopian intent. Concrete poetry, according to Gomringer, strives for *Bewußtseinsbildung* too. It aims to draw attention to structures, and to raise awareness about language usage and communicative strategies:

wir zeigen strukturen, wir stellen strukturen her, wir stellen fehlerhafte strukturen her; denn unsere aufgabe heute ist es unter anderem, auf den kleinen “fehler im system” hinzuweisen, um paul klee zu zitieren, der das wesen der kunst so definierte.⁵²

⁵¹ Eugen Gomringer, “die konstellation. eine neue gedichtform”, p. 48.

⁵² Eugen Gomringer, “weshalb wir unsere dichtung ‘konkrete dichtung’ nennen”, p. 34.

Explicitly following Bill's "Umweltgestaltungsphilosophie", Gomringer declares his objective as "die menschliche umgebung mit den mitteln der zeit und aus dem zeitgeist heraus zu gestalten."⁵³ Gomringer too uses poetry partly as model and experiment for testing structures and organisational principles, just as Bill uses art, with the intention of intervening into and transforming the structures which are exposed: "[es] kann von einer organischen funktion der dichtung nur dann gesprochen werden, wenn sie sich in [...] sprachvorgänge einschaltet."⁵⁴ He claims:

dichtung ist das sprachliche prinzip geistiger ordnung [...]. sie kann von direktem einfluss auf neue kulturelle entwicklungen sein. gesellschaft ihrerseits ist gemeinschaft, beruhend auf sprachlicher kommunikation.⁵⁵

Poetry is to be a useful "seh- und gebrauchsgendstand: denkgendstand – denkspiel [...] es dient dem heutigen menschen durch seinen objektiven spielcharakter."⁵⁶ Gomringer wants his poetry to have a function in society by means of creating models of rational structure:

zweck der neuen dichtung ist, der dichtung wieder eine organische funktion in der gesellschaft zu geben und damit den platz des dichters zu seinem nutzen und zum nutzen der gesellschaft neu zu bestimmen.⁵⁷

Ultimately, concrete poetry should influence everyday language by setting an example of new possible structures, by breaking with convention and habitual communicative strategies: "durch die vorbildlichkeit seiner spielregeln kann das neue gedicht alltagssprache beeinflussen."⁵⁸ This statement in particular is reminiscent of Bill's objective of influencing other spheres of life by means of creating models of harmony and establishing abstract principles such as rationality, functionality and equilibrium in art. Bill writes: "so schafft die kunst kriterien, die allein schon durch ihre existenz stilbildend werden, das heißt einfluß ausüben auf alles, was unserer

⁵³ Eugen Gomringer, "poesie als mittel zur umweltgestaltung", p. 64.

⁵⁴ Eugen Gomringer, "vom vers zur konstellation. zweck und form einer neuen dichtung", p. 156.

⁵⁵ Eugen Gomringer, "23 punkte zum problem 'dichtung und gesellschaft'". In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954 – 1997*, p. 25.

⁵⁶ Eugen Gomringer, "vom vers zur konstellation. zweck und form einer neuen dichtung", p. 156.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

umgebung neu hinzugefügt wird.”⁵⁹ Gomringer too argues that the poet should be emancipated from being a “schöngestige randfigur”, and instead become a useful contributor to society by influencing everyday aesthetics and language:

nehmen wir zum beispiel mondrian: er wollte, dass die visuelle subtilität seiner proportionen und gleichgewichte in die alltagsästhetik eingehen und dadurch dazu beitragen, das geschmacksniveau der gesamten umweltgestaltung zu heben. genau das wünsche ich mir letztendlich auch für die konkrete poesie.⁶⁰

Gomringer is concerned with sensitising the public to structural issues and with calling attention to language codes and functions. Concrete poetry, he claims, “hat die buchstaben- und die schriftwelt in das bewusstsein breiter schichten eingepflanzt.”⁶¹ Moreover, he envisages the creation of a universal language, like Khlebnikov did, but less explicitly formulated and refined. Concrete poetry is to be “ästhetisches stimulans in der entwicklung einer universalen gemeinschaftssprache”.⁶²

There is also an element of language scepticism in Gomringer’s poetry: he mentions for instance the “skepsis der konkreten poesie gegenüber den sprachelementen, deren stellenwert als zeichen im kommunikationsprozess und ihre syntaktischen möglichkeiten”.⁶³ Herwig detects an explicitly educational stance in concrete poetry:

Die aufklärerische Komponente derartiger “sprachdemonstrativer” Verfahrensweisen tritt klar zutage: Gewehrt werden soll jedem unreflektierten, der Manipulation anheim fallenden Sprach(un)verständnis. Darüber hinaus zeigt sich eine tiefverwurzelte Skepsis gegenüber jeder Art von auf Sprache gegründeter Wirklichkeitskonstitution.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Max Bill, “wie sieht die kunst aus um das jahr 2000?”, p. 44.

⁶⁰ Eugen Gomringer, “wie konkret kann konkrete poesie sich engagieren? ein gespräch mit ekkehardt jürgen”. In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. texte und manifeste 1954 – 1997*, p. 99.

⁶¹ Eugen Gomringer, “poesie als mittel zur umweltgestaltung”, p. 69.

⁶² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 67. Gomringer writes: “unter einer gemeinschaftssprache stellen wir uns dabei nicht etwa eine neuauflage von volapük oder esperanto vor, auch nicht eine einzige der gegebenen sprachen [...], sondern eine bewusst auf visueller und auditiver kommunikation beruhende einstellung zur sprache, die schliesslich aus jeder bestehenden sprache eine in zeichen und syntax leichtfassliche sprachanwendung erlaubt. [...] indem sie modelle aus objektivierten elementen verschiedener sprachen herstellt, ist die konkrete poesie zum kern der universal verstandenen gemeinschaftssprache geworden.” *Ibid.*

⁶³ Eugen Gomringer, “poesie als mittel zur umweltgestaltung”, p. 68.

⁶⁴ Oliver Herwig, *Worddesign. Eugen Gomringer und die bildende Kunst*, p. 49.

Interestingly, Gomringer and other German concrete poets are not only attacked by conservative critics who bemoan the “mutilation” of the German language and denigrate the new poetry as “babbling” and “stammering”, but they are equally harshly criticised by the Left. Many left-leaning German critics, including Enzensberger, pour scorn on concrete poetry, branding it as elitist, uncritical, affirmative, autistic, philosophically naive and neither supported by a reflected theory of society nor by a profound conception of language. Moreover, Gomringer in particular has repeatedly been accused of lacking critical distance to advertisement techniques, and even Herwig alleges that his claim that concrete poetry also has a socially critical dimension to it is mere 70’s Zeitgeist-opportunism.⁶⁵

Many critics point out the lack of philosophical profundity in the positions presented in essays and manifestos by the concrete poets, thereby ignoring the fact that they are poets above all, rather than linguists or philosophers, and are therefore not required to be one hundred per cent academically accurate in their declarations.⁶⁶ But the main point of condemnation is unequivocally concrete poetry’s so-called *Kommunikationsbruch*, or “communication breach”, its alleged lack of explicitly tangible content, which, in the mind of many of its critics, automatically implies a lack of political engagement.⁶⁷ Karl Markus Michel for instance asks:

Schwerer wiegt die Frage, wozu denn die Destruktion der Sprache, die nach Auskunft von Heinrich Vormweg zugleich eine Destruktion von Herrschaftsformen ist, taugen soll, wenn sie an der Welt nichts ändert, sie nicht einmal zu deuten erlaubt, sondern nur die Möglichkeiten schafft, die Welt im Zitat zu verdoppeln.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶⁶ Ernst Kostal for instance alleges rather cynically that Gomringer’s philosophical reflection niveau is “weder [...] vorkantisch noch [...] voraristotelisch oder vorplatonisch, sondern bestenfalls [...] neandertalerisch.” Ernst Kostal, “Sprache und Ideologie. Zur Aporie von Intention und Sprachauffassung der Avantgardetheorie”. In: Thomas Kopfermann (ed.), *Theoretische Positionen zur Konkreten Poesie*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1974, p. 118.

⁶⁷ Kostal even goes as far as calling Gomringer a criminal, whose “verbrecherische Bahnen” of thought are implicitly responsible for Vietnam: “[...] alle von Inhalten scheinbar gelösten positivistischen (entpolitisierten etc.) Positionen rechtfertigen mittelbar alle außerhalb ihrer sich ‘vollziehenden’ Inhalte, also etwa auch den Mord in Vietnam. Gomringers ‘Spiel’ erweist sich hier als teuflische Ironie, die über sich selbst nicht bescheid weiß.” *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁶⁸ Quoted from Thomas Kopfermann, “Experiment oder Engagement”. In: *Theoretische Positionen zur Konkreten Poesie*, p. 146.

Michel's dichotomy between experimental and non-experimental literature presupposes that literary works which explicitly discuss social or political defects or call for concrete changes of the status quo always have an effect upon the world and automatically lead to changes in the extra-aesthetic sphere, whereas experimental works operate only in the hermetic realm of aesthetics and have no impact whatsoever upon the real world.

A similar view is proposed by the critic Rita Felsky, who, from a feminist perspective, challenges the merits of experimental literature and the notion of the inherent politics of formal textual subversions in general, since they fail to "offer any analysis of the broader ideological constructs and institutional locations framing the process of textual production and reception".⁶⁹ Felsky accuses experimental writers of esoterism:

Such a position, moreover, tacitly if not explicitly limits an oppositional culture to the reading and writing practices of an intellectual elite, and fails to offer any adequate explanatory account of the relationship between the subversion of internal formal structures and processes of social change.⁷⁰

However, such a polarised argument about the social effectiveness of narrative and content-based literature and the alleged ineffectiveness, elitism and esoterism of experimental literature is not very helpful, since the two types of literature operate on entirely different terrains and need not be pinned one against the other. Moreover, it is a flawed assumption to define one form as automatically effective and the other as futile. Both critics fail to see that the task of creating awareness and raising consciousness can also be conducted on a meta-semiotic level, and that criticism of the status quo and an analysis of dominant ideology and power structures can take many forms and guises. Ultimately, literature can only impact upon reality when it manages to change the way people think, when it forces people to think further than they did before, and when it sharpens their awareness and critical conscience – and this can be achieved on different strategic terrains.

In his own defence, Gomringer writes: "es ist ein ganz grosses engagement, wenn man sich für bewusstseinsbildung einsetzt, wenn man sich um sprachentwicklung,

⁶⁹ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics. Feminist Literature and Social Change*, p. 5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

sprachrelation bemüht.”⁷¹ And Gomringer must indeed be given credit not only for founding an international movement which revived and re-instated the avant-garde tradition, but also for trying to transport the socio-utopian agenda of concrete art into the realms of poetry, for raising awareness of linguistic structures, for drawing attention to semiotic codes and conventions, for taking an active stance towards the events and developments of his own age by means of reflecting on the impact of advertisements, technology and a changed media landscape in his poetry, and ultimately for attempting to make people rethink their positions on language, convention, communication and, by implication, society.

The concrete poet Chris Bezzel points out that the hierarchical organisation of language mirrors the hierarchical organisation of society, and that the revolutionary-minded poet first of all has to tackle and dismantle these linguistic hierarchies, thereby performing within language what he or she wishes to do to society, which, again, is not unlike Kristeva’s notion of the revolutionary implications of a rupture with the symbolic order of language:

revolutionär ist damit eine dichtung, die das medium sprache selbst verändert, umfunktioniert, die den hierarchischen sprachlichen charakter zerstört, die im neuartigen sprachspiel und durch das neuartige sprachspiel diejenige gesellschaftliche umwälzung vorwegnimmt, für die alle revolutionäre arbeiten. dichter unter diesem aspekt ist also der, der mit poetischen mitteln im medium der sprache die sprache selbst als ein menschliches Zeichensystem für menschen revolutioniert. dichtung der revolution bedeutet revolution der dichtung.⁷²

Gomringer’s rigorous abolition of capital letters, both in his poetry and in his theoretical writings, which became a hallmark feature of concrete poetry in general, must be considered above all as a deliberate attempt to break open and intervene into hierarchically structured linguistic systems of organisation. Concrete poetry, like dadaist poetry, aims at subtly challenging the linguistic and ideological boundaries of its recipients by means of interrupting habitual processes of perception and throwing the reader back upon his or her own literary and social preconceptions.

⁷¹ Eugen Gomringer, “wie konkret kann konkrete poesie sich engagieren? ein gespräch mit ekkehardt jürgen”, p. 99.

⁷² Chris Bezzel, “dichtung und revolution”. In: *TEXT + KRITIK. Zeitschrift für Literatur. KONKRETE POESIE*. vol. 25, January 1970, p. 36.

8. NOIGANDRES AND THE RECOVERY OF THE LANGUAGE OF RUPTURE

8.1 Tradition and Innovation: On Cultural Cannibalism

“Concrete poetry: product of a critical evolution of forms”, the brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari proclaim in 1958 in the synthesis of their theoretical writings and manifestos, the “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry”.¹ The poets of the Brazilian *Noigandres* group situate themselves firmly and explicitly in a carefully selected literary tradition and consider their work as the product of a conscious assessment, synthesis and radicalisation of the discoveries of their forerunners. They create for themselves a highly selective ancestry featuring their key influences – “inventors” in the Poundian sense. “Inventors. Men who found a new process, or whose extant work gives us the first known example of a process”, Pound maintains in *ABC of Reading*, in which he presents his own list of writers who “make it new” – those who have contributed most substantially to the development of literary art by means of discovering new processes and methods of verbal expression.² In analogy to the literary charts of Pound, the *Noigandres* group identifies its own four key writers and main influences – “those who are engaged in the pursuit of new forms”,³ the catalysts of “the principal future alternatives of poetic language”:⁴

Forerunners: Mallarmé (*Un coup de dés*, 1897): the first qualitative jump: “subdivisions prismatiques de l’idée”; space (“blancs”) and typographical devices as substantive elements of composition. Pound (*The Cantos*); ideogramic method. Joyce (*Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*): word-ideogram; organic interpenetration of time and space. Cummings: atomization of words, physiognomical typography; expressionistic emphasis on space.⁵

¹ Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campos, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry”. In: Mary Ellen Solt (ed.), *Concrete Poetry. A world view*. Bloomington; London: Indiana University Press, 1970, p. 71.

² Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, p. 39.

³ Augusto de Campos, “The Yale Symposposium on contemporary poetics and concretism: a world view from the 1990s”. In: K. David Jackson, Eric Vos and Johanna Drucker (eds.), *Experimental – Visual – Concrete. Avant-garde Poetry since the 1960s*, p. 369.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

⁵ Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campos, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry”, pp. 71-72.

Each one of the chosen writers is selected for a specific verbal invention considered to make a substantial contribution to the evolution of literary form. Mallarmé features on the list for his conceptual deployment of space – his use of “graphic space as structural agent” and the prismatic spatial subdivision of ideas – as well as the deployment of typographical devices as substantial elements of composition. Joyce supplied the group with one of its most important theoretical concepts, taken from *Finnegans Wake*: the notion of “verbivocovisual”. In its poetry, the *Noigandres* group aims at emphasising all three dimensions of linguistic signs simultaneously. Its members equally accentuate signifier as well as signified, the material as well as the semantic dimension, the visual, the auditory and the referential sphere of language. Augusto maintains:

In *Finnegans Wake*, James Joyce coined a word, “verbivocovisual.” In [concrete poetry], the materiality of the word was given new emphasis: the *voco* and the *visual*, the sound and the graph or the significant live here in equal condition with the *verbi* or the signified [...].⁶

e. e. cummings is given credit for the atomisation and fragmentation of words: cummings radically extends the concept of enjambement from sentence to word by frequently not only running sense and grammatical structure from one line or couplet to the next, as in the classical rhetorical figure, but by splitting up single words into syllables which are then scattered across various lines, often underscored by the deployment of brackets and use of expressive typography to indicate different levels of meaning, as in the poem “a leaf falls”.

Lastly, Pound equipped the group with his conception of literary tradition and the notion of verbal invention, and inspired the poets with his ideogrammatic method as well as with the collage techniques of his *Cantos*, especially the juxtaposition of images and the abolition of syntactic connectives and bridges. Moreover, he furnished the group with its name, which is taken from “Canto XX”, in which the old linguist Lévy despairs about the lost meaning of the word “noigandres”, apparently Provençal, which features in one of Daniel Arnaut’s volumes:

⁶ Augusto de Campos and Roland Greene, “From Dante to the Post-Concrete: An Interview With Augusto de Campos”. At: <http://www.ubu.com/papers/greene02.html> [original from *The Harvard Library Bulletin*, Vol. 3, Summer 1992, no. 2].

And he said: Noigandres! NOIgandres!
“you know for seex mon’s of my life
“Effery night when I go to bett, I say to myself:
“Noigandres, eh, *noigandres*,
“Now what the DEFFIL can that mean!”⁷

By adapting the name *Noigandres*, the poets not only pay tribute both to Pound and Arnaut. In his *Guide to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, William Cookson writes the following about the term “noigandres”:

(Pr) from *Er vei Vermeills vertz, blaus, blancs, gruocs*; the last line of the first strophe ends: *E jois le grans, e l’olors d’enoi gandres*, which probably means: ‘the seed of her love is joy, and her perfume wards off pain or boredom.’ It seems that Pound adopted Lévy’s reading of *d’enoi gandres* (a description of love) as ‘a warder-off of pain or boredom.’⁸

Moreover, they consciously deploy an empty and deliberately mysterious signifier, a word with a lost or ambiguous referential dimension, like Dada.

Additionally to these four key writers, Augusto mentions all European avant-garde movements as well as “the experimental, minimalist, and molecular prose of Gertrude Stein” as important inspirations.⁹ The group also derives interdisciplinary impulses from progressive tendencies in other arts: Sergei Eisenstein is acclaimed for his developments in film montage, and tribute is paid to the “transformation of musical language from Webern to Cage and of the visual from Malevich/Mondrian to Duchamp.”¹⁰

The group’s literary experiments are firmly anchored in a selective genealogy of historic and intertextual references and predecessors. Again, as in Gomringer’s case, this self-confident acknowledgement of the presence of a tradition in their work seems slightly contradictory at first, for the very notion of drawing upon a tradition seems to cancel out the major premises of all innovative avant-garde movements, which are by definition bound to “make it new” and to break radically with all that

⁷ Ezra Pound, “XX”. In: *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions Books, 1948, pp. 89-90.

⁸ William Cookson, *Guide to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*. London; Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985, p. 27.

⁹ Augusto de Campos, “The Yale Symposposium on contemporary poetics and concretism: a world view from the 1990s”, p. 376.

¹⁰ Ibid.

has been done before.¹¹ However, the *Noigandres* group do not consider literary history as a succession of radical ruptures and breaks, but, following Pound, believe in a continuous progressive development of verbal art, in an evolution of form. As Lello Voce writes:

Haroldo de Campos points out with great confidence the presence of tradition *inside* avant-garde. He underlines the fact that any experimentation can't do without a dimension which is both intertextual and historical, in which any new text is the further tessera of and endless dialogue with the past and the future.¹²

In his "Anthropophagite Manifesto" from 1928, Oswald de Andrade, a central protagonist of Brazilian modernism, introduces the notion of cultural cannibalism, the metaphorical consumption of aspects of foreign or past cultures, which are then worked through, analysed, assimilated, equipped with new elements and transformed into a new product.¹³ De Andrade calls for "an anthropophagical vaccine", and proclaims: "Anthropophagy. Absorption of the sacred enemy. In order to transform him into totem."¹⁴ The conquerors of South America, he claims, were fugitives from a civilisation the Brazilians were now ingesting. The notion of cultural cannibalism is closely related to the Brazilians' attempts to liberate themselves from the weight of colonial cultural baggage and to their search for a distinctive identity of their own, which was to include influences both from European as well as their own indigenous cultures. Haroldo describes the cannibalism notion as "the critical ingestion of European culture and the reworking of that tradition in Brazilian terms."¹⁵ Andrade's man-eater metaphor is continually referred to as a concept of great importance by the *Noigandres* group, and seems indeed to encapsulate poignantly the recuperation,

¹¹ Cf. Pedro Reis, who writes: "It may appear paradoxical that a movement that claimed to break with contemporary poetic production and assumed an avant-garde stance in the cultural contexts where it emerged simultaneously placed itself in an artistic tradition." Pedro Reis, "Concrete Poetry: a generic perspective". In: *Experimental – Visual – Concrete. Avant-garde Poetry since the 1960s*, p. 288.

¹² Lello Voce, "Avant-Garde and Tradition: A Critique". In: *Experimental – Visual – Concrete. Avant-garde Poetry since the 1960s*, p. 120.

¹³ Oswald de Andrade, "Anthropophagite Manifesto". In: Ilan Stavans (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Latin American Essays*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 96-99.

Francis Picabia, in the wake of the prevailing fascination with primitivism, also wrote a "Manifest Cannibale Dada" in Paris at the beginning of the 1920s.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-99.

¹⁵ Quoted from Augusto de Campos and Roland Greene, "From Dante to the Post-Concrete: An Interview With Augusto de Campos".

digestion and reworking of the avant-garde and modernist poetic tradition in the group's own work.

The ingestion and analytic reworking of past traditions is perhaps most evident in Haroldo's poem "si len cio" from 1955, where one can detect the main poetic techniques of the group's four principal forerunners. Mallarmé's spatial arrangement of words into prismatic subdivisions features prominently, as well as the Joycean technique of fusing word fragments into portmanteau compounds. Even the atomisation and dissection of words in e.e. cummings' fashion, including the use of brackets and different typography to indicate diverging levels of meaning, can be detected, alongside the Poundian concept of the ideogram. And yet the product of this reworking of the aesthetic heritage results in a distinctive and original creation, illustrating the complex interplay of, and tension between, tradition and invention at work in the concrete poetry movement.

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Haroldo de Campos, "si len cio", 1955

Concrete poetry, argues Augusto, was born out of the "recovery of the 'language of rupture' of the vanguards", and a "critical reflection" upon their works, a reflection "which must be associated with the revision and recuperation of the values of

experimental art after the paralysis brought on by the catastrophe of World War II.”¹⁶

He notes:

I see Concrete poetry as directly engaged with the practices of vanguard, experimental or – as it should probably more adequately be called – inventive poetry. I think that the task of Concrete poetry, after it appeared in the 50s, was to reestablish contact with the poetry of the vanguards of the beginning of the century (Futurism, Cubo-futurism, Dada et alia), which the intervention of two great wars and the proscription of Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships had condemned to marginalization.¹⁷

Augusto, like the poets of the *Wiener Gruppe*, cherishes the notion that the quest of the historical avant-garde is not yet over or sufficiently resolved. He too believes that it has been stifled and terminated prematurely by external forces, and that there are still viable lines of questioning to be taken up again and developed further. Moreover, the poets of the *Noigandres* group consider their work not only as synthesis, but in fact as radicalisation and totalisation of the means of structuring a poem as first explored in the historical avant-garde. Haroldo writes: “Concrete poetry [...] attempted to carry Mallarmé’s project to its ultimate consequences by radicalizing the “verbi-voco-visual” up to its limits.”¹⁸ Augusto even speaks of a “double radicalization”: “a radicalization of a radicalization starting from the radical motions of the vanguards at the beginning of the century.”¹⁹ He states:

[Concrete poetry], in its most consequential and sophisticated products, attempts the most radical, coherent, and constructive re-enactment of the questioning that the vanguards, from Mallarmé to the Futurists and the Dadaists, made concerning poetic language [...].²⁰

Augusto assesses the differences between concrete poetry and the historical avant-garde movements formally and in relation to technological and theoretical developments, arguing that concrete poetry is a “drastic recovery of the vanguard

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Augusto de Campos, “The Yale Symposposium on contemporary poetics and concretism: a world view from the 1990s”, p. 369.

¹⁸ Haroldo de Campos, “The Yale Symposposium on contemporary poetics and concretism: a world view from the 1990s”, p. 386.

¹⁹ Augusto de Campos and Roland Greene, “From Dante to the Post-Concrete: An Interview With Augusto de Campos”.

²⁰ Ibid.

movements from the beginning of the century”, and of “processes implicit in the Futurist, Cubist, and Dada movements (collage, montage, simultaneism)”, which he considers to be linked to a “new physicality in the relations between modern man and the world of signs.”²¹ “Modern physics prompts these new practices, as well as new technologies”, he claims, speaking of an intensification and further development of these existing techniques against the background of new means of communication.²²

Technically, Concrete poets can be distinguished from their antecedents by the radicalization and condensation of the means of structuring a poem, on the horizon of the means of communication of the second half of the century. That implies, among other characteristics, the following: greater constructive rigor in relation to the graphic experiences of Futurists and Dadaists; greater concentration of vocabulary; emphasis on the nondiscursive character of poetry, suppression or relativization of syntactic links; making explicit the materiality of language in its visual and sonorous dimensions; free passage between verbal and nonverbal levels.²³

8.2 The Bauhaus Trajectory

The *Noigandres* group was founded in 1952 by Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari, who were all law students in their twenties at the time, with Ronaldo Azeredo and José Lino Grünewald joining them at a later stage. In the early 1950s, the political, cultural and artistic life in São Paulo underwent significant changes and transformations. João Bandeira writes:

With the Second World War over, the end of the censorship of the New State, the intense mobilization of the Left and the country decisively placed within the range of the political-economic influence of the United States, São Paulo is once more in the throes of great artistic upheaval.²⁴

Getúlio Vargas, the democratically re-elected dictator who installed the quasi-fascist *Estado Novo* in 1937, committed suicide in 1954, making way for Juscelino Kubitschek’s presidency, which lasted from 1956 to 1961. Kubitschek campaigned with the slogan “fifty years of progress in five,” and instigated a period known as

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Augusto de Campos, “The Yale Symposposium on contemporary poetics and concretism: a world view from the 1990s”, p. 385.

²⁴ João Bandeira, “The grain of Noigandres”. In: Lenora de Barros and João Bandeira (eds.), *Grupo Noigandres. Arte Concreta Paulista*. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2002, p. 70.

desenvolvimentismo, or developmentalism, which was marked by economic growth and socio-political optimism, most notable in the daring construction of Brasília, Brazil's Bauhaus-style capital, which was designed by the Le Corbusier followers Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa in the late 1950s. The trajectory of the Bauhaus was to leave distinctive marks in Brazil, and the *Noigandres* group paid explicit tribute to the architects and their ideas in the title of their main theoretical manifesto, the "Pilot Plan". As Augusto points out:

there are interesting coincidences, like the construction of Brasília [...] and [...] we accentuated these, in naming our manifesto of 1958 a "Pilot Plan for CP," in the manner of Costa's "Pilot Plan for Brasília".²⁵

However, this period of optimism and democracy came to an abrupt halt after the military coup of 1964. A series of senior army officers were installed as presidents by the junta, who abandoned constitutional rights, exerted political repression, persecuted critics of the regime and strongly censored the media. The phase of military rule, which was to last until 1984, decisively stifled and repressed the activities of the *Noigandres* group, as Haroldo recalls: "[...] after the military coup of 1964, we went through a long period of suffocation."²⁶

Significant transformations were not only under way in the political sphere, but also in the artistic one. Remarkably, they involved Max Bill, who was to have a lasting impact on Brazilian artistic life. Two modern art museums were inaugurated at the end of the 1940s, and the São Paulo Museum of Art showed a complete Bill retrospective in 1950. One year later, the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art promoted the first São Paulo biennial art festival, during which Bill won the first international prize for his work "dreiteilige einheit". In 1953, Bill was invited by the Brazilian government to give lectures at the University of São Paulo, and served as a member of the jury both for the great architectural prize and for the second biennial art festival. In 1955, the first monograph on Bill was published in Buenos Aires, and in 1957 he participated once more in the biennial festival.²⁷

²⁵ Augusto de Campos and Roland Greene, "From Dante to the Post-Concrete: An Interview With Augusto de Campos".

²⁶ Haroldo de Campos, "The Yale Symposposium on contemporary poetics and concretism: a world view from the 1990s", p. 386.

²⁷ Cf. Franz Larese and Jürg Janett, *Max Bill*, pp.12-16.

The incentive sparked by Bill's works and theories was to contribute significantly to the development of concrete poetry in Brazil. "The impact created by [Bill and his works] on the artistic world is well known", writes Bandeira, "Augusto, Haroldo and Décio are among those who frequently echo the stimulus received."²⁸ Strikingly, Bill is also the connecting thread between *Noigandres* and Gomringer: as a direct result of the impression Bill had made upon many Brazilian artists through his two exhibitions, some of them followed him to study at the 'Hochschule für Gestaltung' in Ulm, which provided the main reason behind Pignatari's visit in 1954. He encountered Gomringer there, and the meeting between Gomringer and Pignatari, the discussion of their respective poetics and the discovery of overwhelming parallels in their conceptual approaches subsequently led to the installation of concrete poetry as an international movement. The German-Brazilian nexus that was established expanded soon, and more and more poets in different countries became aware that they were adhering to similar aesthetic principles. In fact it was the Brazilians who suggested the name "concrete poetry" to Gomringer, who until that point had called his poems constellations.

8.3 *Grupo Ruptura* and the Anticipation of the Digital Turn

The *Noigandres* group published *Noigandres 1*, the first edition of its poetry magazine, in 1952, and four other issues were to follow over the next ten years. Coincidentally, the magazine was published just one month before another São Paulo group, the *Grupo Ruptura*, a group of painters led by the Italian-born Brazilian Waldemar Cordeiro, opened its first important exhibition.²⁹ In its first manifesto, the *Grupo Ruptura* renounced not only figurative art, but also abstract art, and wrote the principles of concretism into its programme. The encounter with Bill's works proved to be of crucial importance for the Ruptura-painters too, and shaped their future artistic path decisively, as Helouise Costa corroborates: "The historical reference is

²⁸ João Bandeira, "The grain of *Noigandres*", pp. 69-75.

²⁹ The *Grupo Ruptura* hosted an internationally diverse mixture of concrete artists, including the Brazilians Geraldo de Barros and Luiz Sacilotto, the Austrian Lothar Charoux, the Hungarian Kazmer Féjer and the Poles Leopoldo Haar and Anatol Wladyslaw.

Mondrian, but real actualization came from contact with the ideas of Max Bill [...].”³⁰

The concrete poets and the painters were to embark upon a fruitful interdisciplinary alliance. The conceptual companionship of *Noigandres* and the *Grupo Ruptura* was manifest in many instances: a shared inclination towards experimentation, a critical analysis of the practices and techniques of the historical avant-gardes, and above all adherence to the concrete agenda, which is accentuated in the poets’ decision to designate their works as concrete poetry in order to emphasise conceptual analogies with the concrete endeavours in other artistic fields. As Augusto pointed out:

In synchrony with the terminology adopted by the visual arts and, up to a certain point, by vanguard music (Concretism, concrete music), I would say there is a concrete poetry.³¹

The transdisciplinary collaboration between the two groups culminated in a shared exhibition, the “National Exhibition of Concrete Art”, a “collective exhibition of concrete painters”, as Cordeiro put it, which was held in 1956 at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art.³² In this exhibition, concrete art and concrete poetry were displayed side by side, with concrete poems hung on the wall as poster-poems. The idea of the poem as placard – something to be looked at rather than to be deciphered successively and to be contemplated publicly in a gallery or museum rather than privately at home – can be traced back yet again to the historical avant-garde: it was the brain-child of Hausmann.

The joint exhibition of the concretists attracted public attention and was extensively covered in the press. Augusto and Cordeiro held another joined exhibition in 1964, displaying works which Augusto called “pop-crete” – a portmanteau word comprising both pop art and concrete:

It seems to me that these structurally concrete ‘paintings’ have gobbled up, critically and anthropomorphically, in a Brazilian way, the experience of American Pop Art. And so the compound pop-crete (pop = concrete).³³

³⁰ Helouise Costa, “Waldemar Cordeiro: rupture as metaphor”. In: Helouise Costa (ed.), *Waldemar Cordeiro: a ruptura como metáfora*. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2002, p. 66.

³¹ Quoted from João Bandeira, “The grain of Noigandres”, p. 72.

³² Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 73.

³³ Quoted from Helouise Costa, “Waldemar Cordeiro: rupture as metaphor”, p. 67.



Augusto de Campos, “Ôlho por Ôlho”, 1964

Augusto’s most well-known pop-crete work is “Ôlho por Ôlho” from 1964, a piece that borders on visual art. At first sight, it seems to be a collage rather than a poem, a tower-shaped construct made of ready-made images of mainly eyes and lips, cut from colour-photo magazines. The collage-poem alludes to two biblical themes: firstly, the tower of Babel incident is evoked by the tower-shape and the images of lips, which conjure up the ancient curse of the confusion of tongues. Secondly, the old-testament slogan “eye for an eye”, which features in the title, is visually illustrated and in fact literally realised by the continuous sequence of cut-out eyes.

Augusto’s collage poem can be read as an illustration of the “verbivocovisual” principle: the images of lips, the most prominent speech organs, and eyes, the instruments of visual perception, seem to allude to the “voco-visual” dimension of linguistic signs, which are conspicuously absent from the poem. Augusto has substituted iconic signs for symbolic ones, photographic images for letters, pictures of the thing itself for its linguistic representatives. However, the images are deployed in a fashion corresponding to the concrete poetry agenda: as discrete building blocks arranged in space, as components of a greater organisational hierarchy, which are both self-sufficient, concrete and autonomous entities in themselves and particles of a larger design.

Another shared interest of Cordeiro and Augusto is the creative exploration of the possibilities opened up by new media and technologies. From 1968 onwards, Cordeiro dedicated himself to the investigation of the artistic potential of computers, producing electronic art which he called *Arteônica*, artronics, a coinage derived from the fusion of art and electronics. Costa points out: “Cordeiro saw electronic art as a logical consequence of concrete art.”³⁴ Augusto too was to embark on the multimedia voyage, and for him, the “digital turn”, the progression from page to computer, seemed also the natural next step in his quest for the “verbivocovisual”. New media, Augusto maintains, opened up new procedures for linguistic codification, “that imply a stricter involvement between the verbal and the non-verbal, which is exactly [concrete poetry’s] field of action”.³⁵ Augusto not only proceeded to experiment with video-text, illuminated panels, computer graphics, holography and laser, but, on his web site, also animated some of his concrete poems by adding a kinetic dimension, and equipped them with a sound track, like “poema bomba” and “cidade/city/cité”.³⁶ He claims that the new media experiments which will be conducted by the following generation will present the third stage of the avant-garde quest:

It is perhaps [...] the exploration of new technological media, and in their interaction with the spectacular arts or multidisciplinary events that we will find “what remains to be done,” probably not by us, but by still embryonic artists who will hold over us the advantage of having these new media at their disposal, and of having mastered them in their most complex and advanced forms.³⁷

³⁴ Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 72. Cordeiro argues: “So, back to the point of departure. What concrete art did: it digitalized the image, numbers, surfaces with quantities, related these quantities, programmed canvases. The execution was artisan only because there was no industry willing to do this and the artists did not have the money to pay. But intentionally, our canvasses were programmed. Concrete canvases could have been produced by printers, by industry, by machine, as they were based on numeric programs – take note – like digital art. Evidently the programming of concrete art is much more elementary than computer programming [...] but the fundamentals are there. This research fits perfectly into modern art, just as do all tendencies generally referred to as constructive.” Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 72.

³⁵ Augusto de Campos and Roland Greene, “From Dante to the Post-Concrete: An Interview With Augusto de Campos”.

³⁶ Augusto’s web site is at: <http://www2.uol.com.br/augustodecampos/poemas.htm>.

³⁷ Augusto de Campos and Roland Greene, “From Dante to the Post-Concrete: An Interview With Augusto de Campos”.

Augusto argues, like many digital poets and critics, that computers finally allow for the realisation, the literal or rather virtual putting into effect of conceptual ideas of the previous avant-gardes: conceptual movement becomes actual movement, static becomes animated, and the “verbivocovisual” structures explored by concrete poetry can now be technologically enhanced with the help of graphic and sound software.³⁸

The virtual movement of the printed word, the typogram, is giving way to the real movement of the computerized word, the videogram, and to the typography of the electronic era. From static to cinematic poetry, which, combined with computerized sound resources, can raise the verbivocovisual structures preconceived by [concrete poetry] to their most complete materialization. In this moment of transition [...] poetry can [...] depart on a broad inter- or multi-media voyage.³⁹

“The ‘wishful thinking’ of the 50s” thus came about with the digital turn and the move of experimental poetry into the sphere of computers.⁴⁰ In fact the vast field of new possibilities opened up by computer technologies, Augusto argues, represents the “ideal space for “verbivocovisual” adventures.”⁴¹

8.4 *Noigandres* and the Poetic Function

In the introduction to the Brazilian edition of his *Open Work*, Umberto Eco writes that “certain problems manifest themselves imperiously at a given historical moment, deducing themselves, almost automatically, from the state of research in progress.”⁴² Eco’s statement is reminiscent of Gomringer’s notion that concrete poetry’s independent and simultaneous emergence at different places in the world at roughly the same time proves that the phenomenon is a discerning, almost unavoidable answer to a specific cultural climate. He refers to the fact that Haroldo had in a small article anticipated the very theories Eco was about to develop, some years before Eco came to his famous theory, “It is curious indeed”, Eco stated,

³⁸ This issue is discussed in detail in the outlook chapter.

³⁹ Augusto de Campos and Roland Greene, “From Dante to the Post-Concrete: An Interview With Augusto de Campos”.

⁴⁰ Augusto de Campos, “The Yale Symposposium on contemporary poetics and concretism: a world view from the 1990s”, p. 388.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Quoted from Helouise Costa, “Waldemar Cordeiro: rupture as metaphor”, p. 67.

that, some years before I wrote *Open work*, Haroldo de Campos, in a small article, anticipated the themes in a shadowy manner, as if he was reviewing a book I had not yet written, though was about to write without having read his article.⁴³

While the *Noigandres* poets drew upon and even anticipated many theories and bodies of ideas, amongst them Eco's notion of the 'open work', one theoretical model proved to be of particular importance: Roman Jakobson's concept of the poetic function. In fact, Jakobson and Haroldo corresponded with each other – a connection which again furnishes the numerous nexuses between the historical and neo-avant-garde, for Jakobson, in his early formalist phase, was highly influenced by Khlebnikov and the other Russian Cubo-Futurists.⁴⁴ As pointed out in the chapter on Khlebnikov, the contact with the Cubo-Futurists stimulated the development of some of the most central theoretical notions of the Formalists. It is striking indeed that a theoretical model which germinated during the time of the historical avant-garde, and which was decidedly inspired by its works, was to be explicitly incorporated into the theoretical framework of the Brazilians roughly fifty years later: Haroldo states that concrete poetry represents "unintentionally an intense, provocative and instantaneous model of the *modus operandi* of the poetic function theorized by Jakobson".⁴⁵ And there are conspicuous conceptual parallels indeed.

In the wider context of the Russian Formalists' general differentiation between poetic and practical language, Jakobson argues in "Linguistics and Poetry" that, in poetry, words are not chosen for their referential function, but for their material qualities – be that their length, number of syllables, stress-pattern, or sound and visual elements. Jakobson defines the poetic function of language as the focus on the message as such, the focus on the message for its own sake.⁴⁶ In content-orientated practical communication, Jakobson maintains, the selection of words is performed on the basis of equivalence – similarity and dissimilarity, synonymy and antonymy. The

⁴³ Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴⁴ Cf. Roman Jakobson's "Martin Codax's Poetic Texture: A Revised Version of a Letter to Haroldo de Campos" for example. In: Roman Jakobson, *Roman Jakobson. Selected Writings III. Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry*. Edited by Stephen Rudy. Paris, New York: Mouton Publishers, 1981, pp. 169-176.

⁴⁵ Haroldo de Campos, "The Yale Symposposium on contemporary poetics and concretism: a world view from the 1990s", p. 386.

⁴⁶ Cf. Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics". In: *Roman Jakobson. Selected Writings III*, p. 25.

combination of words into a sequence, in contrast, is based on contiguity. If the function of a message is not referential but poetic, however, the motives for selection and combination, equivalence and contiguity, are reversed:

*The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence.*⁴⁷

In other words, the building blocks of a poetic text are chosen for their formal and material qualities, rather than for their semantic ones:

In poetry one syllable is equalized with any other syllable of the same sequence; word stress is assumed to equal word stress, as unstress equals unstress; prosodic long is matched with long, and short with short; word boundary equals word boundary, no boundary equals no boundary; syntactic pause equals syntactic pause, no pause equals no pause. Syllables are converted into units of measure, and so are morae or stresses.⁴⁸

Jakobson elaborates further the argument that poetry has always paid attention to the material dimension of language by its emphasis on figures of sound and figures of grammar. Rhyme, rhythm and meter, as well as many of the classical rhetoric figures of speech such as anaphora, alliteration, palindrome, paranomasia and syntactical parallelisms, solely serve the purpose of emphasising the formal aspects of language by means of an artificial and unusual arrangement of the verbal material.

Augusto's claim that concrete poetry acts out what all poetry does, only in a more radical, literal way, and Haroldo's statement that concrete poetry is an instantaneous model of the *modus operandi* of the poetic function seem to converge with Jakobson's theories. The group's endeavours to carry Mallarmé's project to its ultimate consequences "by radicalizing the 'verbi-voco-visual' up to its limits" and its attempts to recuperate the very specificity of poetic language, that is its materiality and autonomy from its purely referential task, can indeed be considered as the practical effectuation of Jakobson's concept of the poetic function.⁴⁹ In fact, it is even a radicalisation: for whereas Jakobson's notion of material still comprised

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 27.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

⁴⁹ Haroldo de Campos, "The Yale Symposposium on contemporary poetics and concretism: a world view from the 1990s", p. 386.

conventional features of poetry dependent on a coherently structured sequence, such as rhyme, rhythm and grammatical and syntactical figures, the *Noigandres* poets operate with and expose the pure material essence of autonomous words, focusing on the concrete qualities of self-sufficient linguistic signs in spatial structures.

8.5 Fenollosa, the Chinese Ideogram and the Iconicity of Language

Ronaldo Azeredo's "velocidade", written in 1957, ties onto the Italian Futurists' fascination with speed. Moreover, it represents a striking example of concepts explored in print which could only later be effectuated and realised with computer technology: here, movement is evoked solely with a skilful arrangement of linguistic signs.⁵⁰

VVVVVVVVVVVV
 VVVVVVVVVVE
 VVVVVVVVEL
 VVVVVVVELO
 VVVVVVELOC
 VVVVVELOCI
 VVVVELOCID
 VVVELOCIDA
 VVELOCIDAD
 VELOCIDADE

Ronaldo Azeredo, "velocidade", 1957

The poem consists of ten lines with ten letters each, forming a narrow rectangle. The tenfold repetition of the letter "v" in the first line of the poem and the subsequent replacement of the "v"s in the following lines with the letter material of the word "velocidade", velocity, do indeed convey a sense of speed and movement. The relentless repetition of one single letter represents the attempt to render the notion of speed ideogramatically, by means of depicting a swift succession, a continuous sequence, the stages or pattern of a motion, as if the letter "v" itself was travelling

⁵⁰ Movement features prominently in Ana Maria Uribe's animated letter series "tipoeems – anipoems" for example, one of which is a reworking of a Futurist poem which is equipped with a kinetic dimension and sound. At: <http://www.vispo.com/uribe/anipoems.html>.

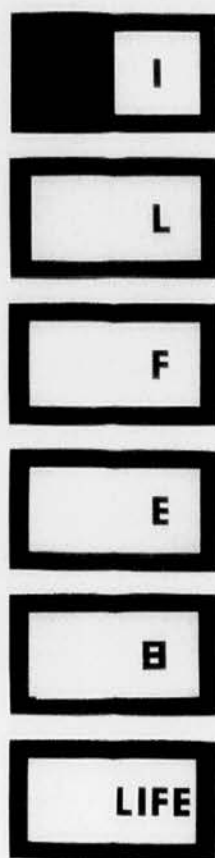
forwards both in time and space, moving from one border of the poem to the other. The letter “v” is transformed from empty signifier deployed in a pictorial fashion to a meaningful element in a word. Moreover, it has in itself a dynamic structure – it consists of two converging diagonal lines spreading in opposite directions. Gradually, the iconic visual evocation of speed is transformed into the signifier of the concept. The “v”s are, one after the other, driven out of the poem by the other letters, and the story of this displacement is of symbolic significance: Azeredo dramatically stages the displacement of the image with language. The poem represents the movement from ideogram to word, from iconic to symbolic representation, and thereby addresses a concern that lies at the very heart of concrete poetry: the tension between the self-sufficient, concrete and physically perceptible material and its semantic charge. Haroldo points out that the information conveyed in line 1 and in line 10 is identical. What is different, however, is the code used for its transportation: one is visual, even though it deploys linguistic signs, and the other is linguistic.

The Futurists tried to paint motion. It was an iconic motion, imitative of reality, like, for example, Cesare Simonetti’s “Treno in corsa”, which has the shape of a projectile. Azeredo’s poem has a different purpose: its dynamic structure moves – and by itself. We may only think of a kind of abstract iconography. The reiteration of VVV – a vertiginous decrescendo – gives on the visual level the same semantic information achieved by the final line of the poem.⁵¹

Pignatari’s poem “life”, published in 1958, also operates with succession and sequence, thematising literature’s essentially temporal nature and progression in time, in opposition to painting, which is a spatial art. The poem was published in the fourth issue of the group’s outlet *Noigandres*, which featured a black cover. The margin of the pages within was also black, evoking the typical layout of obituary notices, which contrasts programmatically with the title of Pignatari’s poem. “life” covers six double pages in the issue, featuring the letters “I”, “L”, “F”, “E”, a non-alphabetic sign, and “LIFE” respectively. The sequence “ILFE” is an anagram of life, which also echoes the German word “Hilfe” – “help”. But the hub of the poem is clearly the non-Roman sign in between the isolated letters and the sequence: it

⁵¹ Haroldo de Campos, “Ronaldo Azeredo (1957)”. In: Emmet Williams (ed.), *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*. New York: Something Else Press, 1967.

contains the poem in miniature, for it represents the sign one derives when all letters are fused into a single sign, when all letters of the poem are written on top of each other. It features three horizontal lines held together by two vertical ones. The horizontal ones are present in the letters “F”, “E” and “L”, and the vertical ones are constitutive parts of all letters. This compound sign represents all letters of the sequence simultaneously, accumulated in one point of space – not only an effective subversion of the temporal and successive structure of language, but also an insertion of a sign from a different writing system, since Pignatari’s nucleus-sign also resembles the Chinese ideogram for “sun”.



Décio Pignatari, “life”, 1958

The reference to the Chinese ideogram is certainly no accident, for the group was familiar with Pound’s admiration for Ernest Fenollosa’s essay “The Chinese written

character as a medium for poetry”.⁵² Just as Chinese ideograms “know no grammar”, and are “round and adaptable like wheels”, words in concrete poetry too are often left neutral: verbs are presented as infinitives, and nouns are free of affixes specifying number or case, so that the recipient is free to relate the words to each other as he or she wishes. The *Noigandres* poets proclaim:

Concrete poetry aims at the least common multiple of language. Hence its tendency to nounising and verbification. [...] Hence its affinities with the so-called *isolating languages* (Chinese).⁵³

“Ideogram: appeal to nonverbal communication. Concrete poem communicates its own structure: structure-content”, the group maintains in the “Pilot Plan”, where the poets also acknowledge the importance of Fenollosa’s ideas:

Qualified space: space-time structure instead of mere linear-temporistical development. Hence the importance of ideogram concept, either in its general sense of spatial or visual syntax, or in its special sense (Fenollosa/Pound) of method of composition based on direct-analogical, not logical-discursive juxtaposition of elements.⁵⁴

Both the abandonment of the line in favour of spatial arrangements as well as the intentional bareness of verbs and nouns in concrete poetry – their lack of inflectional and derivational morphemes – result in open rather than closed structures, in which the task of relating words to each other and of finding paths through the linguistic material is left to the recipient. The words are not linked in a static, unambiguous, “logical-discursive” fashion, but are connected more loosely, in an analogical-associative manner.

Via Fenollosa’s essay it becomes clear that the concreteness of concrete poetry is manifest in the fact that words represent themselves rather than that to which they

⁵² Octavio Paz believes, however, that Pound’s ideographic method and his collage technique was not so much inspired by Fenollosa’s essay and a preoccupation with Chinese and Japanese poets, as Pound claimed, but that it shows striking parallels to Apollinaire’s concept of simultaneism: “I find it clear and self-evident that the compositional method of the *Cantos* is already found in Apollinaire’s simultaneism. It is impossible for Pound not to have encountered the poems of Cendrars, Apollinaire, and Reverdy during his years in Paris. [...] Consider a poem like *Lundi rue Christine*. All one has to do is change the quotations of colloquial phrases into quotations from literary, historical and philosophical texts in several languages, and change the theme – for example, the fall of Troy superimposed on the fall of Paris or Berlin – to find the method of the *Cantos* in embryo.” Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire*, pp. 133-134.

⁵³ Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari, Haroldo de Campos, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry”, p. 72.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 71.

refer, emphasising their status as signs, exposing their concrete materiality, their visual and acoustic dimension. Moreover, the arrangement, typographical design and spatial interaction of linguistic elements have an ideographic quality and capture the idea of the poem in an almost pictorial fashion, as do the Chinese characters. Language is charged with an iconic dimension in space – structure is content.

8.6 Von Webern and the “tension of things-words in space-time”

In Augusto’s “poetamenos” series composed in 1953, the importance both of the visual dimension and the acoustic one becomes evident in yet another instance. The six poems are printed in colour, in the three primary colours red, blue and yellow, and their complementary colours orange, purple and green. Only the last poem of the series features all of the six colours, and the others combine two, four or five respectively. Thus the “poetamenos” aim to appeal both to the ear and the eye, they are both scores for sound poetry and visual poetry simultaneously, for each of the colours is meant to indicate a different voice.

In the preface to the series, Augusto maintains that he aspires to a ‘Klangfarbenmelodie’, a tone-colour-melody with words, as in Anton von Webern’s work: “a melody continuously switching from one instrument to another, constantly changing its color”.⁵⁵ Augusto’s instruments are phrases, words, syllables or letters, “whose timbres are defined by a graphic-phonetic or ‘ideogrammic’ theme.”⁵⁶ Once again, it becomes obvious that the group not only drew inspiration from literary sources, but that they were also stimulated by developments in other arts, in this case music, particularly that of Arnold Schoenberg and von Webern. Augusto writes:

My earliest concrete poems, the cycle called *Poetamenos* (1953), which contains poems printed in color, were directly inspired by the *klangfarbenmelodie* of Anton Webern, a Schoenbergian idea which, for that matter, already suggests the dimension of sound (*klang*) next to the visual dimension of color (*farbe*), as part of the concept of tonal melody.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Quoted from Claus Clüver, “*Klangfarbenmelodie* in Polychromatic Poems: A. von Webern and A. de Campos” In: *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 18, September 1981, no. 3, p. 388.

⁵⁶ Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 386.

⁵⁷ Augusto de Campos and Roland Greene, “From Dante to the Post-Concrete: An Interview With Augusto de Campos”.

Schoenberg's concept of the 'Klangfarbenmelodie', outlined in his "Harmonielehre" of 1911, explores the possibilities of using not only a sequence of different pitches, "conventionally produced by one instrument or group of instruments", but also a "sequence of different tone colours, supposedly on one pitch or vertical group of pitches".⁵⁸ Clüver analyses in great detail the correspondences of the third poem of the "poetamenos" cycle, "lygia fingers", and von Webern's "Quartet for Violin, Clarinet, Tenor Saxophone, and Piano op. 22". Augusto makes the colours of the verbal material of his poem correspond to the tone colour of von Webern's instruments, appealing to several semantic codes simultaneously.

eis
os
amantes sem parentes
senão
os corpos
irmãum gemeoutrem
cimaeu baixela
ecoraçambos
d u p l a m p l i n f a n t u n o (s) e m p r e
semen(t)emventre
estêsse aquelêle
inhumenoutro

Augusto de Campos, "eis os amantes", 1953

The poem "eis os amantes", "here are the lovers", which is the fifth poem of the cycle, also follows von Webern's 'Klangfarbenmelodie' principle – "a continuous melody, displaced from one instrument to another, constantly changing its color or timbre", as Haroldo puts it.⁵⁹ Augusto translated the poem into English himself. It is printed in the complementary colours blue and orange, and unlike the other poems of the cycle, it is arranged symmetrically around a central axis, resulting in a shape

⁵⁸ Quoted from Claus Clüver, "Klangfarbenmelodie in Polychromatic Poems: A. von Webern and A. de Campos", p. 388.

⁵⁹ Haroldo de Campos in: *An Anthology of concrete poetry*.

which is reminiscent of a human body with outstretched arms. The first part reads: “here are the lovers without parents only the bodies”. “Lovers” and “parents” are printed in blue, and are thus set apart from the other words in orange. Many words are Joycean compounds, portmanteau words, amalgamations of word-fragments, which are composed of blue and orange to indicate their different elements. These compound words act out the idea of unification and fusion ideographically by merging separate linguistic elements into one. “Eis os amantes” is a love ideogram, symbolising the act of union, which is epitomised most strongly by the compound “*inoneinhumeintother*”, both on a verbal and a visual level.

The colours of the poem, which were originally black and red, are not symbolic, as Haroldo points out, “but were meant to provide a notation for two timbres, male and female.”⁶⁰ The poem should be read aloud, by a male and a female voice. Augusto often recited it with his wife Lygia, each of them reading one colour. The different colours are like leitmotifs, working in relays. This poem exemplifies not only the interdisciplinary body of references of the group, but also presents another effectuation of the Joycean principle of “verbivocovisual” – for all three dimensions of language are present here: semantic, phonetic and visual qualities are on equal footing and explored simultaneously.⁶¹

“Concrete poetry begins by being aware of graphic space as structural agent”, the group writes in the “Pilot Plan”.⁶² Augusto’s “com som” from 1956 epitomises many propositions from the chief manifesto. It consists of seven duo-syllabic word pairs, sometimes two words, like “com som”, “with sound”, and “sem som”, “without sound”, but mostly words that are split into fragments, like “can-tem”, “they sing”, “con-tém”, “it contains”, “ten-são”, “tension”, “tam-bem”, “also”, and “tom-bem”, “they tumble”. These seven clusters are arranged spatially: two feature on the upper, three on the middle and two at the bottom section of the page, while the last space in the first row and the first in the last row is left empty. Concrete poetry, Augusto

⁶⁰ Haroldo de Campos in: *An Anthology of concrete poetry*.

⁶¹ In 1955, some poems of the *poetamenos* cycle were publicly presented in an early version of a multimedia event. Read by two and four voices, the text was simultaneously projected on a screen with coloured slides, appealing equally to ear, eye and mind. Cf. João Bandeira, “The grain of Noigandres”, p. 72.

⁶² Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari, Haroldo de Campos, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry”, p. 71.

writes, does not only represent space, but acts upon it, “proportioning new spatio-temporal modes of apprehension of the text by the reader.”⁶³

com som	can tem	
con têm	ten são	tam bem
	tom bem	sem som

Augusto de Campos, “com som”, 1956

The word “tension” features prominently in the middle, evoking the group’s famous proposition “concrete poetry: tension of things-words in space-time.”⁶⁴ The poem is framed by explicit references to sound: “with sound” features in the left-hand corner at the top, and “without sound” concludes the poem in the right-hand corner at the bottom. Sounds are the main motives, both literally and on the content level: the poem contains “sounds”, “contém”, and “they sing”, “cantem”, and they tumble all over the poem, “tombem”. The acoustic pattern is dominated by the nasals “m” and “n”, and the vowels “o”, “a”, and “e”, which constitute the aural leitmotifs and are picked up, dropped, and taken up again. Moreover, the poem offers multiple reading directions through a “dynamic structure”, allowing for a “multiplicity of concomitant [reading] movements”, as the group propagates in the “Pilot Plan”:

⁶³ Augusto de Campos and Roland Greene, “From Dante to the Post-Concrete: An Interview With Augusto de Campos”.

⁶⁴ Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari, Haroldo de Campos, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry”, p. 72.

Concrete poem, by using the phonetical system (digits) and analogical syntax, creates a specific linguistic area – “*verbivocovisual*” – which shares the advantages of nonverbal communication, without giving up word’s virtualities.⁶⁵

With the concrete poem, the phenomenon of meta-communication occurs, the simultaneity of different codes and sign-systems: as the group writes, “coincidence and simultaneity of verbal and nonverbal communication” are achieved in the concrete poem. “Only”, they maintain, “it deals with a communication of forms, of a structure-content, not with the usual message communication.”⁶⁶

8.7 Translation as Criticism: *Noigandres* as Cultural Project

Like most poets working along experimental lines, the *Noigandres* group produced a high degree of theoretical output, manifestos and analyses of past avant-garde traditions, most of which are collected in the twice reedited and amended edition of *Teoria da poesia concreta*.⁶⁷ But in contrast to many other experimental poets, and certainly partly because they had access to a more widely read medium for the distribution of ideas – the Sunday supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil* – their voices were acknowledged more extensively than those of the neo-avant-garde poets in Europe.⁶⁸ Clüver maintains:

For over a year they had a national forum where they could not only present their own poetic project but also place their work in an international context of avant-garde literature, music, and visual art to which they introduced the Brazilian public for that purpose, in collaboration with like-minded critics.⁶⁹

Moreover, the poets’ activities were not confined to the realm of poetry: they also operated as critics, theoreticians and particularly as translators. As Clüver rightly points out, it was this “multiple role” which gave the group such a high profile “and

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Augusto de Camos, Décio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campos, *Teoria da poesia concreta*. São Paulo: Invenção, 1965.

⁶⁸ As a result of the attention of the press following the groups first exhibition, the poet Mário Faustino decided to open up a space for the poets in the weekly page he wrote for the Sunday supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil*, called “Poesia e Experiência”, which guaranteed the poets widespread and instant recognition for about a year.

⁶⁹ Claus Clüver, “Concrete poetry: critical perspectives from the 90s”, p. 269.

made 'Concrete Poetry' a household word in intellectual circles [...]."⁷⁰ These specific circumstances might also have prompted Haroldo to maintain that concrete poetry in Brazil, in contrast to concrete poetry in other countries, was not only a new poetic genre, but a cultural project:

We believed that Concrete poetry could contribute to the renovation of poetic language in Brazil. Concrete poetry in Germany, the United States, England, or even Japan was vanguard movement and nothing more. In Brazil, it was also a cultural project that carried a certain weight. [...] All this work in criticism, theory, and translation gives Brazilian Concrete poetry a dimension that was not present in other countries.⁷¹

The poets believed firmly in the redeeming power of translation, perceiving translation as a form of "transcreation", that is "a recreation of the original, by operating through an equivalence of the aesthetic and semantic values of the base-text."⁷² The list of translations produced by the group is impressive and carefully selected. It comprises, amongst others, works by Pound, Mallarmé, Cummings, Apollinaire, Mayakovsky, Joyce, Stein, Brecht, Valéry, Keats, Blake, Cage, Rilke, Donne, Dickinson, Dante and Homer, as well as Provençal and Chinese poetry. But more importantly, and again much in the spirit of Pound, they consider translation as a form of criticism and as a way of instilling a certain spirit into culture. Pound too translated many works from his list of key writers, because he wanted them to be accessible and to leave a mark on contemporary culture. Augusto very much reflects this notion when he talks of establishing a tradition of invention, "injecting into Brazilian literature the new blood of radical works (many of them considered untranslatable) like those of Joyce, Cummings, Stein, Khlebnikov", and at the same time aiming

to redeem, from a creative and not merely didactic point of view, works of the past such as those of Arnaut Daniel, Dante, Cavalcanti, Villon, Donne, and many others.⁷³

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Haroldo de Campos, "The Yale Symposium on contemporary poetics and concretism: a world view from the 1990s", pp. 405-406.

⁷² Augusto de Campos and Roland Greene, "From Dante to the Post-Concrete: An Interview With Augusto de Campos".

⁷³ Augusto de Campos and Roland Greene, "From Dante to the Post-Concrete: An Interview With Augusto de Campos".

By recuperating, ingesting and reworking selected works of the avant-garde tradition in “Brazilian terms”, and also by translating them and thereby making them accessible to the public, the group endeavours to introduce, instill, keep alive and pursue further a critical experimental tradition. This is also an attempt towards *Bewußtseinsbildung*: Augusto conceives concrete poetry as “cultural shock”, as a traumatic force, a “Hiroshima of the culture”, which would reinstall the Mallarméan consciousness at the heart of the notion of poetry. Concrete poetry, he hopes,

might come to be considered not only a type of poetry along with the other types, but a filter through which would emerge this ‘consciousness of consciousness’ to disallow any innocence in relation to poems.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Ibid.

9. THE *WIENER GRUPPE*: UNDER THE AEGIS OF CULTURAL DE-IDENTIFICATION

9.1 Opposing Post-War Austria

In the early 1950s, the poets of the Austrian *Wiener Gruppe* – Friedrich Achleitner, Hans Carl Artmann, Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm and Oswald Wiener –, set out to explore and reclaim the dormant and submerged avant-garde and modernist legacy. Most experimental tendencies in the European arts had been suffocated during World War II, and a large part of the avant-garde heritage was lost or destroyed in the name of the Nazi's degenerate art crusade. The Viennese poets gradually recovered and brought together scattered information about the tradition in an attempt to link up with the most advanced artistic tendencies before the war and in order to make up for lost time. Rühm recalls:

nach sieben jahren gewaltsamer absperrung galt es aufzuholen, was sich inzwischen draussen getan hatte, für uns junge, die bisher verfemte moderne kunst wiederzuentdecken.¹

This proved to be a rather difficult venture, since Austrian libraries did not care much for modernist and avant-garde art and literature even before 1938, and failed to collect important works and documents:

[...] wir waren auf verstreute, dürftige privatbestände angewiesen. die bruchstückhaften informationen über expressionismus, dadaismus, surrealismus, konstruktivismus wurden gierig aufgenommen, weitergereicht, mühsam zu einem bild zusammengefügt.²

Recuperating and tying onto the loose ends of the most radical artistic positions in European literature, and continuing and developing further the quest of the avant-

¹ Gerhard Rühm, "das phänomen 'wiener gruppe' im wien der fünfziger und sechziger jahre". In: Peter Weibel (ed.), *die wiener gruppe/the vienna group. ein moment der moderne 1954-1960/ die visuellen arbeiten und die aktionen. a moment of modernity 1954 – 1960/the visual works and the actions*. Vienna; New York: Springer, 1997, p. 17.

² Ibid. Rühm states that amongst the works the group could get hold of and studied thoroughly were Albert Soergel's *Dichtung und Dichter der Zeit – Im Banne des Expressionismus*, the *Anthologie der Abseitigen*, edited by Carola Giedion-Welcker in 1946, the *Surrealistische Publikationen*, published in 1950, as well as the *Last Operas and Plays* by Gertrude Stein. Cf. *ibid.*

garde, seemed to be the most natural and logical course of action to take for the group, Rühm writes:³

für uns bedeuteten sie die wiederentdeckte wahre tradition, der sich unsere poetischen arbeiten organisch anschlossen. wo sollte es auch *weitergehen*, wenn nicht bei den sogenannten 'endpunkten'?⁴

Contrary to some critics' claims, who denigrated the group's work as Viennese "Nachzündung von Dada und Surrealismus", the retrieval of certain techniques and lines of questioning does not automatically have to result in mere reprisals or repetitions of something outdated which is no longer relevant or topical.⁵ Conversely, as the poet Ernst Jandl has argued, the recuperation of a past practice can also be a dynamic process: open lines of inquiry can be taken up and developed further and can thus serve as intellectual and aesthetic starting points for one's own work:

Diese Ansatzpunkte sind Stellen mit einem offenen Ende, Stellen, wo etwas begonnen hat und nicht weitergeführt oder noch nicht ausgebaut wurde, Punkte, von denen aus sich weiterarbeiten läßt. [...] Tradition, so gesehen, ist etwas Lebendiges und in steter Bewegung; etwas, in dem sich vieles gleichzeitig bewegt, zusammenläuft oder sich trennt, zu immer neuen Mustern.⁶

Within the group, and particularly in Rühm's writings, a strong sense of connecting with something which was not yet sufficiently explored and investigated, a notion of re-opening a chapter in literary history which had been closed too early, of reviving and continuing a quest which had been prematurely abandoned, mostly due to political circumstances, prevailed.⁷ Moreover, the choice of a carefully selected set

³ Arno Holz, Paul Scheerbart, Carl Einstein, August Stramm, Franz Richard Behrens, Kurt Schwitters, Otto Nebel, Hans Arp and Benjamin Perét are amongst those stated most frequently as vital inspirations by Rühm.

⁴ Gerhard Rühm, "das phänomen 'wiener gruppe' im wien der fünfziger und sechziger jahre", pp.17-19.

⁵ Karl Maria Grimme, "Dada plus Surrealismus, wienerisch akzentuiert". In: *Österreichische Neue Tageszeitung*, 17.4.1954. Reprinted in: *die wiener gruppe/ the vienna group*, p. 422.

⁶ Ernst Jandl, "Voraussetzungen, Beispiele und Ziele einer poetischen Arbeitsweise". In: *Theoretische Positionen zur Konkreten Poesie*, p. 58. Cf. Harriet Watts, "Die Wiener Gruppe. Eine Weiterentwicklung der Dada-Experimente". In: Wolfgang Paulsen (ed.), *Österreichische Gegenwart. Die moderne Literatur und ihr Verhältnis zur Tradition*. Bern, Munich: Francke Verlag, 1980, pp. 207-208.

⁷ Political suppression and war, however, were not the only reasons for the gradual fading away of avant-garde activities, other factors played a role as well. The movements often morphed into other formations with different agendas, the times themselves changed and called for different aesthetic responses and strategies, and differences of opinion between the protagonists often lead to the

of literary ancestors was also a strategic operation, which allowed the poets to detach and distinguish themselves from contemporary Austrian cultural practice. Concerning the returns of historical methods in general, and the retrieval of avant-garde techniques in neo-avant-garde works in particular, Foster asks: “how does a *reconnection* with a past practice support a *disconnection* from a present practice and/or a development of a new one?”⁸ The *Wiener Gruppe*’s retrieval and continuation of the avant-garde tradition is undeniably partly a means of cultural disengagement.

The post-war political climate in Austria was above all marked by political and cultural taboos and the desire to repress any critical assessment of the questionable role the country played before and during occupation by Germany’s National Socialists. For decades after the end of the war, the notion that Austria had been nothing but the victim of Hitler’s expansionist assault in 1938 was firmly established through cultural and political consensus, and the instances of collaboration, opportunist adaptation and active participation were ostracised from public discourse, as was the brief period of “Austro-Faschismus” from 1934 to 1938. Efforts at serious denazification, in contrast to those in Germany, were rather moderate as a result.⁹ As Ernst Jäger and Georg Fischer have pointed out, many authors with a NS-past were rehabilitated rather quickly and continued to play vital roles in the post-war literary apparatus.¹⁰ According to Rühm, the cultural atmosphere in the early 1950s was marked by tense nationalism, conservatism and provincialism, and the general public was extremely hostile to all critical, experimental and innovative art. He writes:

dissolution of existing movements. Moreover, the very claim of being avant-garde – being at the very pinnacle of the artistic front and being the most topical and radical manifestation of the times – is by implication a transient non-permanent one, since radical experimentation and innovation is bound to be absorbed by the mainstream at some point, and has to be constantly replaced by other aesthetic novelties, as Berghaus has pointed out. Berghaus writes: “The avant-garde always conceived of itself as a highly ephemeral phenomenon, and not as an institution. Marinetti, for example, described Futurism as a short-lived affair, soon to be overtaken by ‘younger men, who will probably throw us into the waste paper bin like useless manuscripts – we want it to happen!’”. Günter Berghaus, *Avant-garde Performance. Live Events and Electronic Technologies*, p.19.

⁸ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. x.

⁹ Cf. Ernst Fischer and Georg Jäger, “Von der Wiener Gruppe zum Wiener Aktionismus – Problemfelder zur Erforschung der Wiener Avantgarde zwischen 1950 und 1970”. In: Herbert Zeman (ed.), *Die Österreichische Literatur. Ihr Profil von der Jahrhundertwende bis zur Gegenwart (1880-1980)*. Graz-Austria: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1989, p. 619.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 618-620.

schnell wurde deutlich, dass die mehrheit wohl vieles gegen die nazistische kriegspolitik, aber im grunde nichts gegen die 'gesunde' kulturpolitik, einzuwenden gehabt hatte.¹¹

He recalls a climate of ignorance and furious rejection: "jetzt, da man der sogenannten 'entarteten kunst' wieder offen begegnen konnte, erregte sie die gemüter oft bis zu handgreiflichkeiten."¹²

The *Wiener Gruppe*, like the Berlin Dadaists before, derived a significant part of its identity by taking an antagonistic stance towards the political climate and consensus of the time, purposefully adopting an outsider position in the cultural field, opposing the status quo and provoking their audiences by means of programmatic taboo-breaking.¹³ As a result, the poets felt ostracised within their own country, and were shunned and ignored by the literary establishment. Rühm recalls:

wir fühlten uns hier [in Wien] abgeschnitten, auf verlorenem posten. von wenigen abdrucken in zeitschriften und anthologien abgesehen, häuften sich unsere manuskripte in der schublade. wir hatten hier kaum eine chance. In rundfunk, fernsehen, verlagswesen herrschte ein arroganter provinzialismus. mehrmals hatten wir uns beim unterrichtsministerium vergeblich um unterstützung für eine kleine publikationsreihe progressiver poesie bemüht; die öffentlichen subventionen flossen zu dieser zeit fast ausschliesslich in konservative kanäle.¹⁴

Opportunities to publish works were sparse, and initially, the group's works appeared only in minor Austrian literary magazines, with hardly any public recognition.¹⁵ Unlike most other avant-garde formations, the *Wiener Gruppe* lacked its own vehicle of publication: Bayer attempted to publish *edition 62* as a group outlet in 1961, but it was abandoned after just two issues. In 1956, however, Gomringer published some ideograms of the group in his international *spirale* issue, and in 1960, a collaborative work appeared in Franz Mon's *movens*. Hans Carl Artmann's dialect poetry volume *med ana schwoazzn dintn*, published in 1958 by the Otto Müller Verlag, became an unexpected success and an instant national best-seller, but Artmann was to withdraw

¹¹ Gerhard Rühm, "das phänomen 'wiener gruppe' im wien der fünfziger und sechziger jahre", p. 17.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Cf. Michael Backes, *Experimentelle Semiotik in Literaturavantgarden*.

¹⁴ Gerhard Rühm, "das phänomen 'wiener gruppe' im wien der fünfziger und sechziger jahre", p. 29.

¹⁵ Cf. Ernst Fischer and Georg Jäger, "Von der Wiener Gruppe zum Wiener Aktionismus – Problemfelder zur Erforschung der Wiener Avantgarde zwischen 1950 und 1970", p. 626.

from the group soon thereafter. Gradually, however, the works of the other members of the group got published as well, mostly by the German Rowohlt Verlag.¹⁶ Finally, the group had found its way into the literary apparatus. Nevertheless, this critical recognition had materialised in Germany long before it would do in Austria – a phenomenon which can be perceived in the fate of many Austrian writers – and even then this appreciation came after a delay of more than ten years.

9.2 The “Artclub”, Methodological Interventionism and Literary Cabaret

For the *Wiener Gruppe*, interdisciplinary exchanges with progressive artists proved to be decisive and influential, just as they did for Gomringer and the Brazilians. The poets themselves came from diverse artistic backgrounds: Rühm was a trained pianist, Wiener a jazz-saxophonist and Achleitner an architect. Rühm and Artman met in the “Artclub”, established in 1947, described by Rühm as “eigentlich nur eine vereinigung bildender künstler, die bald aber auch literaten und musiker als produzierende gäste anzog”.¹⁷ In 1954, the club “exil” was founded, the name alluding to the artists’ isolated situation within Austrian culture. Rühm recalls the importance of the group’s interdisciplinary contacts:

der kreis [club exil] umfasste dichter, komponisten und maler – marc adrian, maria lassnig und friedrich hundertwasser waren zum beispiel für die sektion malerei verantwortlich. [...] junge architekten und filmavantgardisten wie peter kubelka fanden sich später ein. der enge kontakt, den die progressiven vertreter der verschiedenen künste miteinander pflegten, war für unseren wiener kreis spezifisch und wirkte sich fruchtbar aus.¹⁸

Fischer and Jäger also emphasise the impact of relationships with protagonists of the fine art scene upon the group’s poetics. “Anders als im literarischen Bereich kam es nämlich in den bildenden Künsten nach 1945 in Wien zu einem wirklichen Neubeginn [...]”, they write.¹⁹ The Vienna art scene was in touch with other

¹⁶ Bayer’s works were published first: in 1963, *der stein der weisen* was issued, in 1965, one year after his suicide, *der kopf des vitus bering*, both of them in Germany, and in 1977, the German Rowohlt Verlag published his collected works. After Rühm’s move to Berlin in 1964, things started to look better for him too, and in 1967, he edited the anthology *Die Wiener Gruppe*, also published by Rowohlt, as was Wiener’s *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman* in 1969.

¹⁷ Gerhard Rühm, “das phänomen ‘wiener gruppe’ im wien der fünfziger und sechziger jahre”, p. 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁹ Ernst Fischer and Georg Jäger, “Von der Wiener Gruppe zum Wiener Aktionismus – Problemfelder zur Erforschung der Wiener Avantgarde zwischen 1950 und 1970”, p. 620. They draw particular

European neo-avant-garde trends, and Rühm explicitly pointed out that his sound poems were inspired not only by Hausmann and Schwitters, but also by the expressive spontaneity of Tachism.²⁰

Interdisciplinary collaborations proved fruitful indeed: together with the constructivist sculptor Marc Adrian, the poets developed procedures of systematic text generation, which they called “methodischer interventionismus”. Bayer recalls that it was in fact Adrian who suggested the transfer of the principle of golden section into literature:

marc adrian, damals noch bildhauer, begeistert sich eben am goldenen schnitt und schlägt uns vor, dieses verhältnis in die dichtung einzuführen. in adrians atelier wird der METHODISCHE INTERVENTIONISMUS geboren. wir sind sehr stolz. jeder kann jetzt dichter werden.²¹

In ‘methodological interventionism’, the focus is on the systematic application of arithmetic procedures to a limited stock of words – a purely formal treatment of language, which undermines causal connections between the words and destabilises any notion of semantic coherence, ultimately resulting in the exposure of language’s artifice. “[...] durch permutative ordnung möglichst dissoziierter begriffe zu internen strukturen sollte absolute künstlichkeit erzeugt werden”, Rühm writes, and states further:²²

das sprachliche material, aus einem kausalen begriffszusammenhang gelöst, sollte gleichsam in einen semantischen schwebezustand geraten, auf ‘mechanischem wege’ überraschende wortfolgen und bilder erzeugen. in gewissem sinne handelte es sich hier um eine art systematisierung der alogischen begriffsverknüpfungen des konsequenten surrealismus [...].²³

attention to the importance of the members of the *Wiener Schule des Phantastischen Surrealismus*, and the *Hundsgruppe*, and especially of Arnulf Rainer, who, they argue, played a particularly paradigmatic role, exercising “direkt und indirekt einen nicht zu unterschätzenden Einfluß auf die Entwicklung der Wiener Avantgarde, auch der literarischen”. Ibid., p. 621.

²⁰ Cf. Gerhard Rühm, *TEXT-BILD-MUSIK. ein schau- und lesebuch*. Vienna: Jaschke, 1984, p. 42.

²¹ Konrad Bayer, “hans carl artmann und die wiener dichtergruppe”. In: *die wiener gruppe/ the vienna group*, p. 35. He continues: “man nehme eine anzahl wörter (:den wortstock, auch verbarium), stelle gleichungen nach dem goldenen schnitt auf (später irgendwelche mathematischen reihen, alles war erlaubt) und beginne die wörter danach zu ordnen, auszuzählen bis der wortstock zu ende ist oder sooft [sic] durch den wortstock bis alle wörter verwendet sind (etc. ad libitum....): das ergebnis soll eine harmonische struktur sein. rühm steuert seine erfahrung aus der seriellen musik bei.” Ibid., p. 35.

²² Gerhard Rühm, “das phänomen ‘wiener gruppe’ im wien der fünfziger und sechziger jahre”, pp. 19-21.

²³ Ibid.

The poets declared all kinds of texts as works of literature, including sections from medical books and books on ornithology and grammar, from which passages were cut, decontextualised and rearranged into textual montages, like Artmann's and Bayer's "montagen. nach dem vollständigen lehrbuche der böhmischen sprache des heinrich terebelsky 1853" from 1956, in which fragments of sentences are organised into semantically non-compatible stanzas that are nevertheless poetically alluring, such as:

das reh blutet
die sprossen der wagenräder sind gebrochen
ich habe seinen handschuh verloren²⁴

In "versuch einer unterweisung" from 1964, Rühm appropriates regulations for accident prevention at sea from the Austrian shipping board. He then gradually and subtly manipulates his material, substituting more and more words of the instruction with various inflectional and derivative variations of "blau" – a procedure which is slightly reminiscent of Khlebnikov's in "Incantation by laughter". The last sentence reads:

das blaue blau wird nach blauen des blauen bis etwa ein halbes blau über das blau bzw. blaueste blau geblaut und dann durch blaues blauen oder blau schnellstens zu blau gebracht.²⁵

Furthermore, Rühm dissects and reshuffles a sonnet by the poet Anton Wildgans in 1957, in order to improve it, he claims, aptly calling the result "verbesserung eines sonetts von anton wildgans durch neumontage des wortmaterials".

The systematic and mechanic subjection of words to predetermined stochastic, permutative or other mathematical procedures can also be witnessed in Achleitner's "veränderung. eine studie" from 1960, in which the fragmented sentences of a text taken from a newspaper about the attempts to rescue a woman who committed suicide, are methodologically permuted and re-organised according to serial

²⁴ H.C. Artmann and Konrad Bayer, "vollständiges lehrgedicht für deutsche". In: Gerhard Rühm (ed.), *Die Wiener Gruppe. Achleitner, Artmann, Bayer, Rühm, Wiener. Texte, Gemeinschaftsarbeiten, Aktionen*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1985, p. 201.

²⁵ Gerhard Rühm, "versuch einer unterweisung". In: *Die Wiener Gruppe*, pp. 163-164.

principles, resulting in eighteen different versions. Like Apollinaire and some Dadaists, the *Wiener Gruppe* utilises ready-made textual building blocks for some of its experiments, thereby undermining the notion of hand-crafted self-made literature, passing the creative task on to method and structure. Fischer and Jäger argue that this elimination of the creative impulse in favour of a methodological production of literature is aimed at refuting the myth of the intuitive creative artist, who composes out of an inner subjective urge. Moreover, they suggest, this method constitutes a rebellion against predestined sense and a first attempt at “de-identification” – the endeavour to free oneself from one’s own predetermined forms of thinking:²⁶ “[...] durch Konstruktion eines Textes auf Grund eines numerischen Parameters erscheint Bewußtsein aufgehoben in der Struktur des Materials.”²⁷ The use of chance, method and statistics in poetry – which, in effect, amounts to the dissection of a given text into separate particles and the subsequent re-arrangement of these particles, either in a randomic fashion or according to a specified set of rules – can indeed be considered as a strategy to circumvent deepseated culturally conditioned presumptions. It is a way of obliterating control exercised by the faculty of reason, and a means of liberating the poetic result from any cultural and moral obligations and preconceptions.²⁸

Like the Dadaists, the group also staged two literary cabaret evenings in 1958 and 1959, in which diverse happenings, chansons, dramatic texts, poems and scenes were performed, with the main objective of alienating, provoking and infuriating the audience. Wiener maintains: “wir entschieden uns für ‘literarisches cabaret’ aus sentimentalen wie praktischen gründen; es erinnert an zürich im ersten weltkrieg [...]”.²⁹ In the course of the two evenings, the audience was greeted with forty-five minutes of recorded noises from an oil-rig. Subsequently, the roles of actor and

²⁶ Ernst Fischer and Georg Jäger, “Von der Wiener Gruppe zum Wiener Aktionismus – Problemfelder zur Erforschung der Wiener Avantgarde zwischen 1950 und 1970”, p. 631.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 638.

²⁸ In this respect, the chance-endeavours of the *Wiener Gruppe* are indeed akin to some aspects of Surrealism, as Rühm has pointed out. Breton too aimed above all at bypassing and outwitting the censorship and control of reason in his automatic texts. Breton writes: “SURREALISME, n. m. Automatismes psychiques par lequel on se propose d’exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée. Dictée de la pensée, en l’absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale.” André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969, p. 37.

²⁹ Oswald Wiener, “das ‘literarische cabaret’ der wiener gruppe”. In: *Die Wiener Gruppe*, p. 404.

spectator were reversed: the performers sat on stage in chairs facing the audience, which was blinded by spotlights, only staring at them and commenting on their appearance and behaviour. A piano was violently smashed into pieces, Rühm and Achleitner drove into the auditorium on a motorbike, Achleitner's head was shaven bald, and Rühm feigned an epileptic fit. Rühm claimed a publication by an expert entomologist to be a contribution to literature that he had written himself, and the "verächtliche Haltung" against the audience, as Wiener put it, was manifest in many more assaults aiming at testing their ability to take stress, including the screening of a movie about Salzburgian lumberjacks provided with a sound track featuring rutting noises of turtles.³⁰

Here too, similar to the Dadaist evenings in the Cabaret Voltaire, the emphasis was on breaking with the predetermined expectations of the recipients. Automatised strategies of perception were deliberately violated, easily digestible sense and meaning was withdrawn, the recipients were systematically provoked, shaken out of their passive attitudes and thrown back upon their own preconceptions and ways of thinking. Ultimately, the group desired that this confrontation would serve as incentive for the audience to question their assumptions and scrutinise their value structures.

9.3 Minimalist Reduction and Radical Dissection

The *Wiener Gruppe*'s range of poetic activities was prolific: they experimented not only with methodologically contrived texts but also with sound and visual poetry and they creatively exploited the Viennese dialect as new material for their poems. Rühm also composed entirely abstract poems, with no semantic dimension at all, as Hausmann had done before him. The most minimalist of Rühm's "lautgedichte", written between 1952 and 1956, is unquestionably the "atemgedicht":

³⁰ Planned but not realised was the confrontation of the Austrian chancellor with dancing bears on stage, the burning of the unread expressions of spectators' opinions before their eyes, the performance of a "Geruchschanson" by means of spraying unpleasant odours into the auditorium and the real pulverisation of a volunteer's gold watch with a hammer, under the pretence that it was a failed conjuring trick. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 401-419.

atemgedicht
(ein- und ausatmen:)

h
h
h
h

h
h

h
h
h

h

Gerhard Rühm, "atemgedicht", 1952-1956

Here, spoken language is stripped down to its ultimate precondition, to its underlying driving force: breath. The poem consists of four rhythmically structured units, of which the two longer ones represent the act of breathing in, which takes generally more time than breathing out. The two shorter ones signify the breathing out units. The first stanza is the most extensive entity, twice as long as the second one. A blank space features between the third and the fourth unit, interrupting the second respiratory movement and requiring the performer to hold his or her breath. The relief of the air-stream is only allowed after a significant pause, which constitutes the climax of the poem. In contrast to Hausmann's "fmsbw", the letters featured here do not stand for themselves, but for a subtle sound produced by a bodily activity: the delicate noises of drawing in and breathing out air. The poem is a score for a rhythmical orchestration of breath – the "h"s are like notes representing sounds.

Apart from the title and the subtitle, which also functions as instructions for use, the poem lacks any semantic dimension at all, but features one other constitutive element of poetry: rhythm. Acoustically, Rühm's "atemgedicht" is perhaps the most minimalist feasible poem at all – coming as close as possible to silence. Respiratory noise is the one sound that can not be cut down any further or eliminated – it is the most radical reduction possible, the negative apex, indeed the *Nullpunkt* of spoken poetry. The "atemgedicht" directs the attention to the most basic human activity, to a sound which is always present but never to the fore.

Breathing is perhaps the most automatised human activity of all, and Rühm subtly calls attention to the contraction of muscles causing air to be drawn in or pushed out of the lungs, to the air-stream flowing through the trachea, the larynx and the vocal chords. Breathing is the most fundamental prerequisite of speech, for there can be no speech sounds without outgoing or incoming air-streams. In quiet breathing, the vocal folds are kept wide apart from each other, so that the stream of air is not impeded and passes without a sound. “h” is amongst those letters closest to this silent movement of breath: the glottis does not vibrate, the air passing through the vocal chords causes only a slight friction, the chords do not swing but remain almost still. “atemgedicht”, due to its meditative and self-reflective quality, is also a poem about silence. At the same time, it subtly thematises rhythm, by means of structuring and interrupting the regular flow of inhalation and exhalation.

Rühm and Achleitner in particular also produced ideograms and constellations adhering to the conceptual premises formulated by Gomringer.³¹ In 1956, they met Gomringer in Ulm. Rühm recalls how the members of the group became agitated and excited when they learned that other poets experimented with language in ways similar to their own. His account about the trans-nationality of the movement, its simultaneous emergence all over the world and its compelling topicality is very reminiscent of the words Gomringer has found to describe the phenomenon:

[...] dass solche kreationen unabhängig voneinander an verschiedenen orten entstanden bestätigte nur ihre zwingende aktualität. die übernationalität, in der literatur ein neues phänomen, ist ein bedeutsamer aspekt “konkreter poesie”, der dem bedürfnis nach einer vereinfachten weltsprache, wenn auch nur im ästhetischen bereich, entgegenkommt. ihre modellhafte anschaulichkeit entspricht der zeitgemässen forderung nach konzentrierter information. das schriftbild – augenfällig – ist von essentieller bedeutung. die ökonomie der mittel, verbunden mit ihrer ästhetischen differenzierung, wird ein zentraler ästhetischer programmpunkt. [...] noch kaum abzusehende neue ausdrucksmittel und möglichkeiten wurden akut.³²

³¹ Wiener, Artmann and Bayer were only marginally interested in concrete poetry. Rühm and Achleitner too did not consider themselves exclusively as concrete poets, but saw it as one form amongst others of their language experiments. Rühm writes: “allerdings betrachteten auch achleitner und ich uns nie ausschliesslich als ‘konkrete dichter’, schon aus der scheu heraus, unser arbeitsfeld durch einen katalogisierenden begriff festlegen zu lassen. prinzipiell ging es uns seit je um eine auseinandersetzung mit dem gesamten bereich der sprache, was die einordnung in stilrichtungen oder ismen gegenstandslos macht.” Gerhard Rühm, “das phänomen ‘wiener gruppe’ im wien der fünfziger und sechziger jahre”, p. 25.

³² Ibid., p. 29.

The use of the material in a functional and not only symbolic way is where the objectives of the *Wiener Gruppe* and the concrete poets coincide most notably: they are equally concerned with the exemplification and exposure of the codes, rules and structures that govern the linguistic system, and they consciously deploy space and the sensually perceptible dimensions of language as poetic material. Most importantly, they too embark on the activity of language dissection.

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undun dun dun dun dun d
undun dun dun dun dun d
zer br eche n

Gerhard Rühm, “zerbrechen”, 1954-1957

One of the most remarkable examples for the taking apart of the language system, in fact a literal and thematic realisation of the principle of linguistic dissection, is Rühm’s typewriter ideogram “zerbrechen”, part of a series written between 1954 and 1957. Ten identical lines, strictly arranged underneath one other, each feature the letter material for six “und”. Line 11 displays the fragmented word “zerbrechen”, “to break into pieces”. In lines 1 to 10, the conjunctive “und” is torn apart, and only fragments remain: one “un”, five “dun” and a singular “d” per line. “zerbrechen” is also dissected into five random units, “zer”, “br”, “ech”, “e” and “n”. Conspicuously, the meaning of the word “zerbrechen” is put into effect here: the poem performs the meaning of its title, for it breaks its word material into non-semantic sound clusters by means of inserting blank spaces where none should be and by fusing letters together that should be separated. “zerbrechen” hence both signifies and performs its

meaning iconically – the sequence of the letters is disrupted, the reading flow is impeded and disturbed, and the concept, the signified, is effectuated: the formerly meaningful linguistic unit is broken into fragments that no longer signify anything. A direct correlation between the formal presentation of the word and its meaning is thus established.

The dis- and rejoined “und”s also dramatise their semantic charge, for as conjunctions, their syntactical function is to join parts of speech together. This too is performed and effectuated literally, for even the signifier material of the “und”s is fused together by means of obliterating the spaces between letters. Space is used to upset semantics and to disrupt established orders of signs and habits of perception.³³ Only if the recipient performs mental mending-work or disentangles illegitimate amalgamations can the shattered signifiers, and with them the semantic dimension, be restored. “zerbrechen”, which, like many other concrete poems, exploits the spatial precision of the typewriter, violates the traditional segmental organisation of words, and effectively focusses awareness on the internal mechanisms of language by thematising the word material and the underlying codes and conventions that govern our language usage.

Achleitner directs the attention of the recipient to even more minuscule language structures. In “tau”, written in 1957, he plays with the difference between visual and acoustic similarities on the level of the signifier and semantic incompatibility on the level of the signified. Visually striking, the left-aligned word-column forms three isosceles triangle shapes on its right hand margin, which are methodologically constructed by either adding or deducting one letter per line. The constructivist pattern, augmenting the letters from three to five and reducing them back again, is repeated three times. Like ebb and flow, the words grow and diminish in a regular rhythm, which could be continued infinitely.

³³ Cf. Michael Backes, who analyses this poem as well. Michael Backes, *Experimentelle Semiotik in Literaturavantgarden*, p. 47 f.

tau
taub
taube
taub
tau
taub
taube
taub
tau
taub
taube
taub
tau

Friedrich Achleitner, "tau", 1957

The letter-sequence "tau" is the lowest common denominator of all thirteen words, their basic linguistic building block. "tau" could be nominal, and designate either "dew" or "rope". Alternatively, "tau" could be the imperative form of the verb "tauen", which means to melt or to thaw, or, as Backes has pointed out, the imperative of "to tow". "taub" designates either "numb" or "deaf", and "taube" could either signify "pigeon", "dove", a "female deaf person" or "deaf people" in general. All three words are based on the same morphological root. Though the derivational alteration of the words seems minimal, the signifieds change dramatically. Although the signifiers look and sound reasonably similar, Achleitner seems to point out, their meanings differ drastically. Backes states:

Die Vorstellung der drei Elementarworte läßt sich als Exemplifikation der bedeutungsunterscheidenden Funktion der Grapheme im Vergleich zu ihrer bedeutungstragenden Funktion auffassen.³⁴

The designated concepts of the poem remain incompatible. In search of meaning, the recipient needs to turn to the material dimension of language. The visual and acoustic analogy of the signifiers and the fact that they originate from the same word-stem is a unifying principle here, as is the number of letters, which are used in a constructivist

³⁴ Ibid., p. 239.

fashion as building material for a geometric shape. The words featured in the poem qualify as constituents only because of their formal and material qualities – the idea of Jakobson’s poetic function carried to its utmost extreme. Their semantic dimension is relevant solely for its purposefully bewildering incompatibility.

Achleitner explores the materiality of language constructively, and plays on a very subtle level with the delicacy of meaning by making a poem from “minimal pairs”, that is words differing in just one distinguishable sound, but contrasting in their meaning. Words here represent their physical and formal qualities above all. Their referential function is ironically undermined, for the poem makes sense on a material level only.

The same principle of material analogy seems to govern Rühm’s constellations “hartzart” and “leibleib”. In contrast to Achleitner’s poem, however, the semantic dimension of the words is consciously deployed and plays a vital role. Here, the signifiers again share the same material apart from one letter, but the designated concepts are of poetic significance. The adjectives featured in “hartzart”, which is a word-column consisting of numerous “hart”s and only one “zart”, are roughly semantic opposites, again in spite of the fact that they have three of their four letters in common.

leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leib leib
leib leib leibleib

Gerhard Rühm, “leibleib”, 1954-1964

“leibleib”, one of a series of constellations written between 1954 and 1964, is organised around a spatial pun.³⁵ “leib”, a rather old-fashioned German word for

³⁵ Gerhard Rühm, “leibleib”. In: *Die Wiener Gruppe*, p. 145.

“body”, features four times in each one of seven identical lines organised underneath each other, so that there are also four vertical “leib” columns. In line 8, however, the pattern is violated: the third “leib” is displaced. It is shifted two spaces to the right, effectively obliterating the dividing space between “leib” three and four. They formally appear as one word, and semantically as a fusion of two words. If one reads the last letter of the first “leib” as the first letter of the next word, the result is “bleib”, the imperative of “to stay”, an effect which occurs also on the acoustic level when the poem is read out loud. The double meaning generated by a change of word-position also has semantic significance: the poem could be read as a love poem, as an invitation for a cherished body to stay with the lover a little longer – this is formally suggested by the amalgamation of two words into one, which could be read as an iconic imagery for love. Alternatively, “leibleib” can be interpreted as an elegy for immortality, a lament against ageing and death and the unavoidable withering away of the body.

9.4 Wiener and the Project of Cultural De-Identification

The concrete poetic experiments of the *Wiener Gruppe*, maintains Wiener, were above all an investigation into the mechanisms of communication and an instrument for the exploration and study of cognitive patterns.³⁶

in für mich dem einzig bedeutenden teil der heute so genannten konkreten poesie war sie ein experiment, sich über die mechanismen des verstehens und des ‘wirken’ von sprache erste hypothesen zu verschaffen. [...] das schreiben ist nicht ein mittel künstlerischer ‘darstellung’ gewesen, sondern ein instrument zur untersuchung von denkvorgängen und für den schreibenden ein natürlicher hebel zum hinausschieben seiner im schreiben ihm merkbar werdenden vorstellungsschranken.³⁷

Poetic writing was a tool, a means to examine and ultimately to transgress the boundaries of one’s own mechanisms of thinking, Wiener maintains. He articulates his most radical theoretical positions in *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman*, a

³⁶ Cf. Fischer and Jäger, who call the *Wiener Gruppe* an unprecedented “kunst- und kultursoziologisches Experiment [...], das den Mechanismen der Kommunikation, der Konstruktion von Wirklichkeit sowie den psycho-physischen Verankerungen bürgerlicher Kunst, Kultur und Gesellschaft galt.” Ernst Fischer and Georg Jäger, “Von der Wiener Gruppe zum Wiener Aktionismus – Problemfelder zur Erforschung der Wiener Avantgarde zwischen 1950 und 1970”, p. 663.

³⁷ Oswald Wiener, “Einiges über Konrad Bayer”. In: *die wiener gruppe/ the vienna group*, p. 43.

hybrid between philosophy, theory and prose, in which he scrutinises and subverts the most fundamental assumptions about language, reality and culture. “man wird von der sprache vergewaltigt”, he proclaims, and asks:³⁸ “umwieviele raffinessen des genußes bringt uns diese sture sprache? wieviele sinne gehen an ihrem standard zugrunde?”, echoing sentiments of the fin de siècle language sceptics, who also despaired about the fact that perception itself seems to be structured and limited by language.³⁹ However, Wiener goes much further: he perceives language not only as an artificial barrier which predetermines, shapes and ultimately distorts the perception of reality, like coloured glasses which one cannot take off, but also as a mechanism which always already implies and perpetuates certain forms of behaviour. Friedbert Aspetsberger points out that language, according to Wiener, is equivalent to a system of behavioural strategies, that it even comes close to a world order:

Das in der Sprache im gesellschaftlichen Bereich vorgegebene Selbstverständnis, das ein stets weiter oder in sich selbst zurückweisendes Zeigsystem darstellt, gleicht einer totalen Weltordnung.⁴⁰

Wiener seeks to break through the barriers of language in his works in order to free himself from his own culturally and linguistically pre-determined and preconditioned mechanisms of thinking, feeling and behaving. Wiener very much perceives language as symbolic order which supports and stabilises given power structures. Similar to Kristeva, he believes in the inherent politics of form, in the notion that a rupture with the symbolic order of language might produce a rupture elsewhere, beyond the sphere of poetics. His example demonstrates most strikingly that the group was not just interested in language, but in fact in all that comes with it as well: ultimately, the poets’ experiments with and criticism of language were means of criticising and de-identifying with the cultural status quo. Criticism of language, Wiener proclaims, equals criticism of society:

³⁸ Oswald Wiener, *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1972, p. XII.

³⁹ Ibid., p. XXVIII.

⁴⁰ Friedbert Aspetsberger, “Sprachkritik als Gesellschaftskritik (Von der Wiener Gruppe zu O. Wieners ‘die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman’)”. In: Institut für Österreichkunde (ed.), *Zeit- und Gesellschaftskritik in der Österreichischen Literatur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*. Vienna: Verlag Ferdinand Hirt, 1973, p. 151.

die sprache wird gemeinhin als gesellschaftliches bewußtsein, ja als gedächtnis der menschheit bezeichnet. diesen kalauer einmal wörtlich genommen: ein aufstand gegen die sprache ist ein aufstand gegen die gesellschaft.⁴¹

The symbolic order of language and the order of society are viewed as being inextricably interlaced, and the break with one implies the break with the other. Weibel rightly points out that the most important legacy of the *Wiener Gruppe* are its “conceptual positions which most radically surpassed the aesthetic consensus of the time [...] – criticism of the state and of reality by means of criticising the language [...]”.⁴² The group’s attacks upon the order of language must indeed be considered as paradigmatic for a deeper, more profound investigative agenda. The poets probe into the very heart of culture, communication and convention. Language is above all a form of social consensus, and, in the case of the *Wiener Gruppe*, it is considered paradigmatic for social orders and agreement in general, just one example for and manifestation of the whole body of cultural norms, rules, traditions, practice and etiquette that are manifest in many other cultural sub-systems.

Aspetsberger rightly points out that the group’s cultural criticism is above all evident in the act of breaking with established communicative conventions, and that critical engagement can be manifest formally as well, not just on the level of content:

[...] nicht nur die Formulierung bestimmter kritischer Inhalte zeigt gesellschaftskritische Elemente in der Literatur, sondern der tiefergreifende Prozeß von Veränderungen entsteht gerade in unseren durch Massenmedien stark sprachmanipulierten Zeit im Bruch mit den herkömmlichen Kommunikationskanälen. Die Erzeugung von Sprachbewußtsein allein schon erweist sich als kritischer Ansatz gegenüber den stets gesellschaftlich konkret geprägten Kommunikationsformen.⁴³

It is the attempt to instil awareness, to refine and to raise consciousness, which constitutes the socio-critical moment in the works of the group, Aspetsberger writes, and in contrast to concrete political agendas, which are always limited to specific ideas and notions, this kind of criticism questions the most profound pillars upon

⁴¹ Oswald Wiener: *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman*, p. CXLIV.

⁴² Peter Weibel, “Vorwort”. In: *die wiener gruppe/ the vienna group*, p. 15.

⁴³ Friedbert Aspetsberger, “Sprachkritik als Gesellschaftskritik (Von der Wiener Gruppe zu O. Wieners ‘die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman’)”, pp. 150-151.

which culture is based. Language dissection in the *Wiener Gruppe* is a meta-semiotic tool for a profound inquisition into cultural values, an assault upon cognitive mechanisms and habitual strategies of perception, an exposure and problematisation of standardised and automatised systems.

Wiener maintains that the group's poetic attacks were not directed against a particular culture, a specific type of state or concrete political circumstances, but against state, culture and language themselves, against all the values, truths, treasures, objectives and rules that come with them, against everything that shapes, restricts and hinders the free mobility and development of thought:

[...] dieses motiv war, so scheint es mir und so fühle ich es noch, die ahnung, dass wir nicht nur von einer 'bürgerlichen' kultur, sondern von jeder, insbesondere auch von all dem, was seit zweihundertfünfzig jahren oder länger als wahrheit, sinn und erkenntnis gegen die bürgerliche kultur vorgebracht worden ist, in der beweglichkeit unseres denkens und in der entfaltung unserer möglichkeiten des verstehens, in unserem umgang mit 'fakten', in unseren versuchen der de-identifikation gehemmt worden sind, der protest war nicht gegen einen bestimmten staat oder sonst eine folklöre, sondern gegen staat, sprache, konsens, verfahren, modelle, 'denkgesetze'; nicht gegen verhaltensstile, sondern gegen die formen des eigenen denkens.⁴⁴

The centre of attention of Wiener's poetic endeavours are the culturally imposed boundaries of his own intellectual faculties, his very own pre-determined and seemingly insurmountable epistemological strategies and limitations, which he aims to transgress by means of cultural de-identification, the assault not only upon the visible values, orders and forms of culture but also upon his own mechanisms of thinking. Like Ball before him, Wiener perceives language as essentially stained, compromised and corrupted by history:

mit der geschichte lehne ich auch die mit ihr kompromittierte sprache ab. ich schaffe die nicht ab doch dekretiere ich verrottung mittels der gesamt-kunstwerke meiner gespräche.⁴⁵

In "die folgen geistiger ausschweifung. vortrag für zwei personen", Wiener and Bayer depict language as based on stereotypes, on thoughts which are, statistically

⁴⁴ Oswald Wiener, "Einiges über Konrad Bayer", p. 43.

⁴⁵ Oswald Wiener, *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman*, p. XXXVI.

speaking, the most frequent ones. Only concepts for thoughts which are commonly and regularly thought by many people exist, they argue, and they lament the conceptual impossibility of expressing truly original ideas, things which nobody else has thought before:

oswald: [...] die sprache stellt für die gedankenübermittlung stereotypen zur verfügung; diese stereotypen haben ihren ursprung in der tatsache, dass manche "gedankeninhalte" weitaus häufiger übermittelt werden sollen als andere. [...] die sprache folgt den statistischen häufigkeiten der stattgefunden habenden gedankengänge.

konrad: es wird immer schwerer zu sprechen, wenn es sich um gedanken handelt, die noch nicht in die sprache übersetzt worden sind.⁴⁶

Wiener's criticism is not only directed at the representational quality of language or its conceptual limitation, but at the fact that language, and by implication culture, structures, dictates and organises virtually everything, from thinking, perceiving, feeling to cognition itself.

Wiener is clearly building upon the earlier writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who postulated in the *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus* in 1919 that the limits of language are also the limits of thinking: Wittgenstein perceives all epistemological problems as language problems, all philosophical confusion as language-based. The limits of our worlds, he argues, are determined by what can be demonstrated in language, and are thus defined by the limits of language and what is logically possible within it: "*Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt.*"⁴⁷

Wiener seems to have radicalised Wittgenstein's notion, expanding it from epistemological issues to socio-cultural ones. He despairs about the "unlösbare Verflechtung von Sprache, Verhalten und gesellschaftlicher Ordnung", as Fischer and Jäger put it, and about the fact that there seems to be no straightforward escape from this condition.⁴⁸ "ich bin durch die kultur verdorben: wo ich empfinde gibt es formen, immer etwas bestimmtes, [...] was immer ich beginne hat profil", he writes.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Konrad Bayer and Oswald Wiener, "die folgen geistiger ausschweifung. vortrag für zwei personen". In: *Die Wiener Gruppe*, p. 319.

⁴⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung. Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, p. 134.

⁴⁸ Ernst Fischer and Georg Jäger, "Von der Wiener Gruppe zum Wiener Aktionismus – Problemfelder zur Erforschung der Wiener Avantgarde zwischen 1950 und 1970", p. 643.

⁴⁹ Oswald Wiener, *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman*, p. XV.

Whereas Wiener's objectives are explicitly expressed on a discursive level, the cultural critique transported by the constellations and ideograms discussed in the previous section is revealed in substance at the level of the signifier. It is manifest formally, in the specific poetic procedures, techniques and methods, in the way the language material is treated. Rühm writes:

es war uns klar, dass die aktualität künstlerischer arbeit nicht bloss thematisch, vielmehr substantiell sein müsste, dass sie sich in den mitteln und methoden, in der handhabung des materials selbst [...] dokumentieren sollte.⁵⁰

Rühm and Achleitner express their critique not only with language, as in their theoretical texts, but they also perform it poetically. The interruption of the smooth flow of language, its dissection on diverse levels and the mechanical production of texts can all be considered as instances of cultural de-identification, as attempts to break through the boundaries of culturally predetermined structures. The poets put their critique into effect within language, operating at its very heart, uncovering and putting into play its structures, codes and functions. Aspetsberger concedes that the dissection of, and break with, automatised linguistic forms itself is a critical act:

Der gesellschaftskritische Ansatz der betrachteten Literatur in der Zeit von der "Wiener Gruppe" bis zu O. Wieners Roman liegt beim adäquaten Medium, ist also ein sprachlicher: deutlich in "Veränderung" bzw. Bewußtmachung, im Zerschneiden und Umkehren der sprachlichen, literarischen und sprachlich vermittelten gesellschaftlichen Formen, die uns in der Gewohnheit gefangen nehmen und uns – die Sprache unsere Welt – unüberschreitbar erscheinen.⁵¹

Language in the *Wiener Gruppe* serves as the paradigmatic structural model for social norms, rules and conventions in general.⁵² Symbolically, culture and all that comes with it is broken into pieces too in the linguistic dissections of the Viennese poets.

⁵⁰ Gerhard Rühm, "das phänomen 'wiener gruppe' im wien der fünfziger und sechziger jahre", p. 29.

⁵¹ Friedbert Aspetsberger, "Sprachkritik als Gesellschaftskritik (Von der Wiener Gruppe zu O. Wieners 'die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman')", p. 167.

⁵² Weibel observes: "in advance of the linguistic and structural turn, the vienna group dealt with language as a universal model for the construction of reality [...]." Peter Weibel, "Vorwort". In: *die wiener gruppe/ the vienna group*, p. 15.

10. MON AND THE POETICS OF SURFACE

10.1 Dissecting Damaged Language

In 1951, Theodor W. Adorno put forth the proposition that it was barbaric to write poems after Auschwitz. The full implications of his statement are still debated: perhaps Adorno merely aimed at stimulating reflection and discussion about the possibility or impossibility of adequately representing, confronting and processing the abominable crime against humanity by aesthetic means. Maybe he did indeed mean to issue a general prohibition for post-war poetry or even art, as many critics believed. Possibly he wanted to draw attention to the fact that while it was absolutely necessary to attempt to write both after and about Auschwitz, it was also an inherently paradoxical endeavour, always in danger of aestheticisation, stylisation and ultimately of not paying justice to the true horror and significance of the Holocaust.¹ Whichever way it is read, Adorno's disputed statement had a massive impact on post-war discussions about the possibilities and functions of literature in Germany. In its aftermath, the responsibilities and limitations not only of poetry and art in general, but also of the German language and the role it played in the Third Reich propaganda apparatus, were problematised and scrutinised.

While not many of the German concrete poets referred to the events that took place between 1933 and 1945 on a discursive level, and much more frequently named changes in media and communication structures, technological inventions, influences from the fine arts and theoretical discourse as triggers for their poetic endeavours, the Nazi era had undoubtedly left its mark, shaping their treatment of language and contributing to their mistrust of it. Helmut Heißenbüttel's "Deutschland 1944" remains, however, one of the very few experimental poetic texts in the vicinity of concrete poetry in which the Third Reich is thematised explicitly. In this poem, Heißenbüttel dissects quotes from speeches and texts from Hitler, Himmler, Göbbels, Jünger, Benn and from a Wehrmacht-report and combines the material in a

¹ In later texts Adorno somewhat modifies the force of the sentence: in "Ist die Kunst heiter?" from 1967, for example, he states that the sentence was not directed against all art, but more specifically against cheerful art. In a passage from his *Ästhetische Theorien* called "Möglichkeiten der Kunst heute", he strongly argues against general verdicts and prohibitions and against attempts to abolish art. Art remains necessary, and suffering has "Recht auf Ausdruck", he maintains. Cf. Petra Kiedaisch (ed.), *Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter*. Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam jun., 1995.

disturbing collage. The crassest available examples of abused, impure and ideologically tainted language are decontextualised, exposed and problematised in this piece, vividly illustrating Barthe's dictum that the crimes begin when letters are being strung together to form words, that it is then that they begin to lose their innocence. Moreover, "Deutschland 1944" demonstrates its power as a site of cultural resistance by means of subverting the instrumental function of language – in some ways, its fragmented nature pays justice to Adorno's notion of a rejection of reconciliation inherent in non-organic form.

Franz Mon, who did not belong to any close-knit group structure, but was affiliated with the *Stuttgarter Gruppe*, and worked as an editor for a German school book publisher until 1991, calls the text a laconic exposure of the times and a lament against language as an accomplice and partner in crime:

Deutschland 1944 ist lakonische Zeitaufnahme und Klage gegen Sprache als Mittäter. Die Geschehnisse, die zur Sprache kommen, sind geschehen, weil Sprache als Medium mithandelnd verfügbar war. Natürlich ist "die Sprache" keine Täterin, sie zu subjektivieren, gibt keinen Sinn. Aber sie ist auch kein neutrales, indifferentes Mittel, das so reinlich wieder hervortritt, wie es eingegeben wurde. Die Farbe dessen, was sie mitbewirkt hat, bleibt ihr anhaften.²

Language, while it is not an autonomous agent but rather object and tool, is nevertheless changed and tinged by historical usage, Mon argues, and its deployment in the Third Reich left it damaged, tainted and contaminated. Mon, like Ball before him, who refused to deploy a language which had been abused by journalists and politicians in World War I, considers language as essentially stained and corrupted by the Nazis' abuse of it for the transmission of propaganda, lies, terror and anti-Semitic ideology. Hans Christian Kosler observes: "Bis in die 60er Jahre, in denen die wichtigsten theoretischen Arbeiten Mons entstanden, ging das Problembewußtsein, eine beschädigte Sprache vor sich zu haben."³

² Franz Mon, "'eine Art von Erinnerung hat sich erhalten' – Zu *Deutschland 1944* von Helmut Heißenbüttel". In: Franz Mon, *Essays. Gesammelte Texte*, vol. 1. Berlin: Gerhard Wolf Janus press, 1994, p. 291.

³ Hans Christian Kosler, "Sprachkritik und Spracherotik in der experimentellen Literatur. Die Poetik Franz Mons im Umfeld einer möglichen Wahrnehmung". In: *Franz Mon. TEXT UND KRITIK. Zeitschrift für Literatur*, vol. 60, 1978, p. 7.

As a solution to the dilemma caused by the desire to write and to communicate on the one hand, but on the other hand the feeling of being unable to use and accept as given the parameters of existing language, Mon, again like Ball, seeks refuge in its presumably last untainted, unbiased resort: its material realm. He writes:

Es ist eine geschlagene Sprache, bedenkt man, woran sie beteiligt war und ist. Aber welche Wahl haben wir. Allmählich zur Besinnung kommen. Eine Kerbe einschlagen, gleich an welcher Stelle, damit wenigstens ein Punkt wiederzuerkennen ist. Feststellen, nachspielen, wiederholen und feststellen, fallen lassen, markieren, abtasten, nachzeichnen, vorwegnehmen. Sprache, diese angefochtene, zermürbte Sprache als "Material" nehmen, wobei auch ihre Erinnerung und die Spuren ihres Geschickes mitzählen, um vielleicht im skeptischen Umgang mit ihr der Möglichkeiten inne zu werden, die noch immer und vielleicht gerade auf Grund ihrer erschreckenden Geschichte bestehen.⁴

Within the framework of Mon's poetics, the probing examination and dissection of a worn-out language, and its radical objectification and treatment as material, which explicitly implies not only its visual and acoustic but also its semantic and historical dimension, can to a certain extent be considered as a way of dealing with historical baggage, as a means of assimilating and working through it and as an attempt at getting to the bottom of things and starting anew.

In keeping with Jakobson and the Formalist agenda, Mon considers the de-automatisation of habitual processes of reception to be one of the main aims of poetry in general: metre, rhyme, alliteration, metaphor and inversion, he claims, are nothing but means to slow down the process of perception, to make language more obstinate, edgy and harder to digest. "Vom pragmatischen Gebrauch her erscheint Poesie als verfremdender Eingriff in den glatten Sprachverlauf", he states.⁵ Language in ordinary communication, Mon argues, functions most efficiently when its signature disappears completely behind its vehicle-function, when its visual and phonetic dimension can be ignored and do not disturb the smooth process of message transmission. It is one of the tasks of poetry to direct attention back to the material, and to problematise and interrupt its purely message-orientated function:

⁴ Franz Mon, "Sprache ohne Zukunft?". In: Friedrich Handt (ed.), *Deutsch – gefrorene Sprache in einem gefrorenen Land? Polemik, Analysen, Aufsätze*. Berlin: Literarisches Colloquium Berlin, 1964, pp. 45-46.

⁵ Franz Mon, "An eine Säge denken". In: *Theoretische Positionen zur Konkreten Poesie*, p. 29.

Die Geschichte der Poesie besteht aus den Erfindungen, mit denen sie Sprache der selbstverständlichen, achtungslosen Vernutzung im zivilisatorischen Getriebe entzieht und in eine Autonomie versetzt, die ihr alle Welt nicht müde wird zu bestreiten. Eine Autonomie [...] die unlösbar an ihre "Entfremdung" im zivilisatorischen Funktionieren gebunden ist.⁶

Mon's focus here is not just on "making strange", on tearing the veil of familiarity from the word and the world by means of disrupting automatised processes of perception in order to call attention to the sign system and its conventions. He is also intruding into unexplored realms of meaning which transgress epistemological boundaries, that which is speakable and thinkable in ordinary discourse, in order to open up alternative ways of thinking and assessing the world:

Poesie ist die Anstrengung, diesen Funktionsvorgang zu durchbrechen und aufzuheben, die Sprache in ihrem Vollzug durch das Subjekt auf sich selbst zu beziehen, ihren Zeichenkörper – Laute, Silben, Wörter, Satzformen usw. – hervortreten, "Material" werden zu lassen und dabei möglicherweise Sinnhinsichten zu erschließen, die anders nicht erreichbar sind, da sie nicht in den konventionellen Bedeutungen und Sinnschemata erfaßt sind. Sprache verhält sich zu sich selbst, ohne von ihren zivilisatorischen Funktionen gehetzt zu werden.⁷

This process of breaking through the functions and boundaries of ordinary discourse, Mon claims, is an inherently critical endeavour: an interrogation, problematisation and calling into question of the conventions that govern our language usage. "Dabei tritt der doppelte Sinn von Prozeß als Kritik und Hervorbringung, als 'Verhör', Infragestellung, Beim-Wort-Nehmen zu Tage", he writes.⁸ Gisela Dischner states:

Das Unterbrechen des automatisierten Sprachablaufs, die unterirdische Krise, die eine Kunst auslöst, welche nicht der Wiedererkennung des schon Bekannten sich unterwirft, die "verweigerung der repräsentativen funktion" (Weibel) – hier sind Momente eines Engagements gegen das Bestehende [...].⁹

⁶ Ibid., pp. 29-30.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

⁹ Gisela Dischner, "Über die Unverständlichkeit. Zur Krise der Repräsentanz". In: *Franz Mon. TEXT UND KRITIK. Zeitschrift für Literatur*, p. 21.

Another instance of commitment in Mon's poetry can be found in its deliberate minimalism, in its radical reduction of language that starkly contrasts with the contemporary "Sprachschwall", and which functions as a subtle but persistent critique of "der Masse von Gerede, dessen Hervorbringer nicht wissen, daß sie mit tausenden fertiger Versatzstücke hantieren."¹⁰ Siegfried J. Schmidt points out too that the extreme concentration of concrete poetry uncovers the redundancy as well as the "Verbrauch und die Abnutzung von Sprache" of ordinary discourse in advertisements, politics and the media.¹¹ Rather than addressing this issue thematically, however, the concrete poets show it, exemplifying and illustrating their theories by creating alternative ideals. Schmidt writes:

Das Dilemma des Dichters angesichts erschöpfter Themen und Ausdrucksformen wird in konkreter Dichtung nicht wie in der traditionellen Literatur der Zeitgenossen abgehandelt in Reflexionen über die Schwierigkeit des Schreibens und des Lebens, sondern radikaler und eindrucklicher gezeigt in den ausgesparten Redeweisen – in der kommentarlosen Reduktion der andernorts so gewaltig verbrauchten Sprachmittel, im Verzicht auf "Aussage".¹²

Schmidt poignantly illustrates the difference between telling and showing, between reflecting and doing: the poets of the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde effectuate their beliefs poetically, immediately realising them within language rather than discussing them on a discursive level.

Mon, in contrast to more utopian colleagues, seems however to have more modest expectations concerning the potential effects of his writing: his rhetoric is rather sober and the assessment of prospects and perspectives seems subdued. "Die Kunst hat keinesfalls die Kraft, die zivilisatorische Entfremdung selbst aufzuheben", he writes. Nevertheless, he too considers the creation of awareness and the shaping of an understanding and alertness about communicative processes as a realistic aim. The suggestion of other possible worlds and ways of thinking, as well as the articulation of protest and the abstract negation of the status quo, are to contribute to the installation of a critical awareness in public discourse:

¹⁰ Franz Mon, "Über konkrete Poesie". In: *Texte über Texte*, p. 139.

¹¹ Siegfried J. Schmidt, "Zur Poetik der konkreten Dichtung". In: *Theoretische Positionen zur Konkreten Poesie*, p. 85.

¹² Ibid., p. 86.

Es genügt, daß [die Kunst] jene Existenzform des volldimensionierten Subjekts am Leben erhält und durch die Analogiebezüge hindurch der zivilisatorischen Physiognomie das unerwartete und doch begründete Gesicht der Freiheit, des Spiels, des neuen "Ganzen" zeigt und vermutlich dadurch, daß sie die Fähigkeit der Negation, des Protestes übt, an der Fortdauer des Problembewußtseins, auf dem der Bestand der zivilisatorischen Welt beruht, beteiligt ist.¹³

Assessing the differences in tone between proclamations made by the protagonists of the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde, Walter Höllerer speaks of a "verhaltenere Gestik". Kosler, meanwhile, maintains that the claim to sole representation, which he defines as characteristic for the historical avant-garde, has given way to a more rational self-assessment and more moderate aims: "Aufgabe und Ziel des experimentellen Schreibens werden mit äußerster Vorsicht, meist im Potentialis formuliert [...]."¹⁴ He argues further:

Die experimentelle Literatur negierte nicht die "avantgardistische Intention einer Rückführung der Kunst in die Lebenspraxis", wie Bürger meinte, sondern für sie war eine derart hochgeschraubte Erwartung an die Aufgabe von Kunst und Literatur gar nicht diskutabel. Sowohl das Wissen von der Unwiederholbarkeit der Avantgarde als auch die realistische Beurteilung der Möglichkeiten bzw. Unmöglichkeiten einer nach außen gewandten Kunst haben die "experimentelle Fragestellungen" (Mon) außerhalb der "Lebenspraxis" bestimmt.¹⁵

However, apart from the fact that the shaping and creating of awareness would have to be situated within the realm of "Lebenspraxis", Kosler's generalised dichotomy between the historical and the neo-avant-garde, designating the former as utopian and the latter as soberly realistic, seems problematic. While it might be suitable for characterising Mon's endeavours, it by no means does justice to all neo-avant-garde poetics. Wiener's theories and rhetoric, for example, seem to be at the different end of the scale and undermine Kosler's model. Kosler's observation that proclamations of the neo-avant-garde poets are more realistic, rational, careful and controlled, however, is to a certain degree valid, but might be put down not only to less utopian objectives and more rational expectations but also to another cause: the poets of the

¹³ Franz Mon, "Perspektive". In: *Texte über Texte*, p. 32.

¹⁴ Hans Christian Kosler, "Sprachkritik und Spracherotik in der experimentellen Literatur. Die Poetik Franz Mons im Umfeld einer möglichen Wahrnehmung", p. 5.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

neo-avant-garde have at their disposal a completely different and much more refined arsenal of concepts and theories to draw upon and with which to describe and assess their intentions. Mon is very much aware of this, and draws attention to the significance of a “Verfeinerung des Zeichen- und Symbolbegriffs.”¹⁶ He also publishes an essay about the theory and aesthetics of the sign by Pierre Guiraud in his compilation *movens* in 1960, in which Guiraud presents a survey of the latest developments in linguistics, semiotics, cybernetics and communication theory and argues that these new theories should be deployed to elucidate the arts.¹⁷ Guiraud believes that new theories and concepts have the potential to help illuminate and broaden the epistemological and terminological horizon in the debate of current artistic problems:

Indessen sind die Wissenschaften doch schon imstand, den Künsten eine Terminologie [sic] und einen epistemologischen Rahmen zu geben, die geeignet sind, ihre Probleme, wenn schon nicht zu erneuern, so doch durch Neuformulierungen zu erhellen.¹⁸

While the aesthetic and epistemological problems addressed in the work of the concrete poets might to a certain degree still be the same as, or link up with, those in the historical avant-garde, they can be delineated and defined much more precisely, which also implies that the investigations themselves may become more specific and accurate and that the quest might be elevated to a new theory-enhanced level of enquiry.

10.2 Mon's Notion of Material

Language for Mon is not just means to an end, not just a transmission medium, but also an object, a concrete, autonomous entity representing itself.¹⁹ Mon considers language to be a physical object in its own right, in accordance with the OED definition of concrete as “existing in a material or physical form; real or solid; not

¹⁶ Franz Mon, “An eine Säge denken”, p. 34.

¹⁷ For a more detailed description of “movens” see below.

¹⁸ Pierre Guiraud, “Zu einer Ästhetik des Zeichens”. In: Franz Mon (ed.), *movens. Dokumente und Analysen zur Dichtung, bildenden Kunst, Musik, Architektur*. Edited in collaboration with Walter Höllerer and Manfred de la Motte. Wiesbaden: Limes Verlag, 1960, p. 97.

¹⁹ “Der poetische Text unterscheidet sich von solchen Mitteilungssprachen, daß er an jeder Stelle bei sich selbst ist. Er vermittelt nichts als sich selbst, auch wenn er irgendwelche Inhalte darzustellen scheint.” Franz Mon, “Text als Prozeß”. In: *Texte über Texte*, p. 96.

abstract". Moreover, he emphasises the reality-generating function of language and thus the possible implications of its dissection: our reality, Mon argues, is highly dependent, if not founded upon, language:

Im Sinn der hier dargelegten Poetik ist Sprache darüber hinaus ein autonomes Medium, durch das der Mensch sich nicht nur auf sich und seine Welt bezieht, sondern das ihm, imprägniert von Wirklichkeit und diese unabsehbar reflektierend, als konkretes Gebilde gegenübertritt. [...] Von welcher Mächtigkeit und wie ungeheuer zugleich die Entfremdung zu ihr erscheint, wird klar, wenn man sich Rechenschaft darüber gibt, in welchem Ausmaß unsere Realität sprachbedingt, ja sprachbegründet ist [...].²⁰

Mon notes that the very first artists to use language in a concrete fashion were in fact the Cubists: they inserted fragmented words or individual letters into images, mixing two diametrically opposed sign systems, one operating sequentially in time and the other simultaneously in space. These letters were freed from any representative or pragmatic tasks and their function as signs for sounds. They appeared both as cut-out fragments, as remnants of a lost unity and as abstract forms, justified by their aesthetic values and the compositional context of the image only: "Bei den Kubisten wird Schrift ihrer Vermittlerrolle entfremdet; statt auf einen Lautzusammenhang zu verweisen, gerät sie in einen Bildzusammenhang."²¹

Mon, like all other concrete poets before him, emphasises the parallels between procedures in the fine arts and in literature: "So wird poetisches Sprachmaterial analogen formalen Fragestellungen unterzogen wie das der Musik oder der Malerei, wenn auch mit seiner Eigenart entsprechenden Varianten."²² For in literature too script explores its optical dimension, something which Mon considers to have been exploited initially by Mallarmé and the Futurists, who compensated for the breaking up of syntactical structures by emphasising surface and typographical values. Additionally, they offered the readers various different possibilities of connecting the poetic parts:

Die eindeutige Aufeinanderfolge der Sprache und der ihr gehorsamen Schrift ist zugunsten eines Simultanbildes aufgegeben, in dem sich vielfältige

²⁰ Franz Mon, "An eine Säge denken", p. 32.

²¹ Franz Mon, "Schrift als Sprache". In: *Texte über Texte*, p. 59.

²² Franz Mon, "An eine Säge denken", p. 33.

Beziehungen knüpfen können, in dem es Schwerpunkte, Akzente, aber keinen Anfang und keinen Schluß gibt.²³

Script reclaims what it once possessed, for it used to be of a pictorial nature, Mon writes. This pictorial dimension, however, has gradually been reduced when letters became mere functions of sound, signs for signs, and when script became increasingly functional and was finally standardised by print. Our written alphabet is a secondary medium for a primary one, spoken language, it is a mere vehicle for sounds, Mon maintains, and yet this twofold separation from objects and concepts is also its advantage: "buchstaben sind zeichen für zeichen und daher von der sprache schon wieder soweit distanziert daß sie sprache reflektieren können wenn sie in bewegung geraten [...]".²⁴

Nevertheless, Mon, like Gomringer and the poets of the *Noigandres* group, emphatically emphasises that semantics too belong to the material realm and should not be discarded. Mon's notion of language material encompasses all its dimensions, even its micro-articulatory and most minuscule levels of organisation:

Der poetische Materialbegriff umfaßt nicht nur das wahrnehmbare, tönende oder sichtbare Zeichensubstrat, er umfaßt alle an der Sprache beteiligten Schichten vom phonetischen Stoff über die artikulatorische, verbale, syntaktische bis zur semantischen Struktur.²⁵

aus den augen aus dem regen
aus dem regen aus der traum
aus der traum aus dem sinn
aus dem sinn aus den augen
aus den augen aus der traum
aus der traum aus dem regen
aus dem regen aus dem sinn
aus dem sinn aus der traum
aus der traum aus den augen
aus den augen aus dem sinn
aus dem sinn aus dem regen
aus dem regen aus den augen

Franz Mon, "aus den augen aus dem regen", 1966

²³ Franz Mon, "Schrift als Sprache", p. 60.

²⁴ Franz Mon, "buchstabenkonstellationen". In: *konkrete poesie deutschsprachiger autoren. anthologie*, p. 173.

²⁵ Franz Mon, "An eine Säge denken", p. 33.

The semantic structure is indeed significant in “aus den augen aus dem regen”, written in 1966, because it is deliberately defamiliarised and de-functionalised. The poem consists of the first half of the proverb “Aus dem Regen in die Traufe”, roughly equivalent to “out of the frying pan into the fire”, both parts of “Aus den Augen aus dem Sinn”, “out of sight, out of mind”, as well as the one-part idiom “Aus der Traum”, “the dream is over”. The phrase-fragments are formally unified by featuring three words each and beginning with “aus”. The proverb building blocks are arranged underneath each other in two columns. The five units are systematically subjected to permutation: every possible combination is methodologically played through, so that every entity is combined once with each of the other three ones, with the exception of “aus dem regen”, which features in both columns. The last element in a line is always the first in the next line, which results in unusual, surprising semantic constellations.

Like “Lundi Rue Christine”, this is a collage poem: Mon utilises ready-made, found language material which is cut into pieces and pasted into new compositional hierarchies, where the fragmented parts acquire different functions and meanings. By dissecting and recombining the familiar axioms into unexpected constellations, Mon interrupts their predetermined semantics and connotations. This is no accident: the targets of his poetic remix, idioms and proverbs, are the epitomes of frozen automatised structures, and are even more arbitrary and convention-based than non-figurative language, for their meanings do not even depend on the meaning of their component parts, but purely on conventionalised usage. Kosler maintains that Mon destroys truisms and proverbs both in order to show how massive the gap between word and thing has become in set phrases, and to demonstrate how big “die Gefahr ist, daß die sprichwörtlichen Prägungen selbst die Realität zu beherrschen und zu prägen beginnen.”²⁶ Mon thus embarks on a crusade against a “von Sprachstereotypen wetterfest imprägnierten Wirklichkeit.”²⁷

By means of shattering customary metaphorical frameworks, Mon forces the reader to reflect upon the decontextualised phrases anew and to take them literally again, at

²⁶ Hans Christian Kosler, “Sprachkritik und Spracherotik in der experimentellen Literatur. Die Poetik Franz Mons im Umfeld einer möglichen Wahrnehmung”, p. 8.

²⁷ Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 8.

their word-value. He thus subverts and sabotages their cultural purpose – to concisely express a general truth or maxim – and unmasks not only language but also ready-made truisms as manipulable objects, as pure material:

Die sprachlichen Gebilde erscheinen jetzt als das, was sie sind: Objekt unter Objekten, beliebige Versatzstücke, verdinglichtes Material, das neuen Formintentionen zur Verfügung steht. Sprachcollagen und Collagertexte werden möglich.²⁸

10.3 The Importance of Surface

Mon heralds one aspect of concrete poetry in particular: he is the prophet of surface, the advocate of the creative exploitation of the spatial values of the page. In concrete poetry, he argues, the functions of surface replace the functions of grammar and open up a whole new range of possibilities, both for poetry and thought. The relations between spatially arranged words are not fixed and unambiguously predetermined like the relations of words firmly arranged in syntactical hierarchies, but are open and flexible and subject to continual redefinition during the process of reception. The position of the textual elements on the page, distance between them and density of the textual field all acquire potential semantic significance, and serve as “ergänzung, erweiterung, spannung, negation” of the conventional means of structuring a poem.²⁹

die fläche wird dabei selbst zur textkonstituante; sie bringt ihre bedeutungsmomente, wie zentrum, rand, oben, unten, rechts, links, mit in den lesezusammenhang, und die textpartikel gewinnt in diesem koordinatensystem stellenwert und spezifische reichweite.³⁰

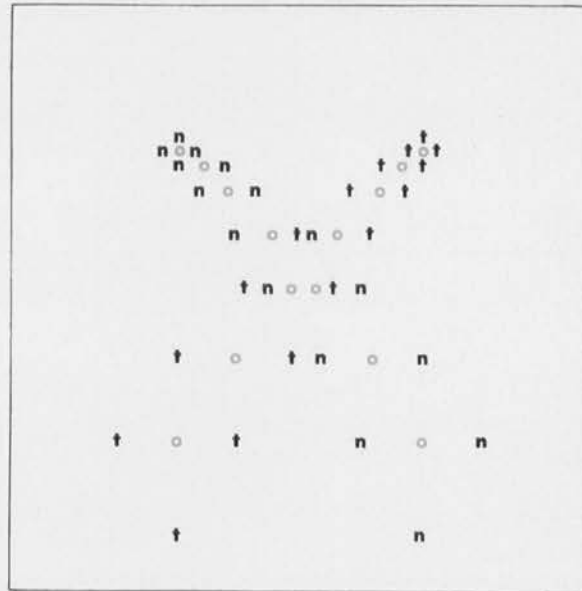
Surface values thus constitute a novel way of charging language with meaning, allowing for the expression of what cannot be expressed within the boundaries of existing grammatical frameworks: “Syntaktische Beziehungen diesseits der

²⁸ Franz Mon, “Collagertexte und Sprachcollagen”. In: *Texte über Texte*, p. 122.

²⁹ Franz Mon, “zur poesie der fläche”. In: *konkrete poesie deutschsprachiger autoren. anthologie*, p. 170. Schmidt also points out that the activation of surface values is one of the most important novelties in concrete poetry, and that the position of letter elements are charged with semantic values. He writes: “Die Verteilung der Schriftzeichen auf der Fläche ermöglicht die Kombination von optisch-graphischen Valeurs (Verteilung, Distanz, Verhältnis von Flächenpositionen – wie Zentrum, Rand, oben, unten, außen, innen, rechts, links – zueinander und zum Flächenganzen) mit semantischen Bedeutungswerten. Der Raum wird [...] als bislang vernachlässigte Dimension dichterischer Sprachgestaltung entdeckt und zum Teil begeistert proklamiert [...]” Siegfried J. Schmidt, “Zur Poetik der konkreten Dichtung”, pp. 80 – 81.

³⁰ Franz Mon, “zur poesie der fläche”, pp. 168 – 169.

gewohnten Grammatik werden möglich”, Mon writes.³¹ Again it was the Futurists, he argues, who were the first to weave typographical and spatial values so inextricably into the text-structure that it became inseparable from it. He states: “Sie machen die Fläche, auf der der Text steht, zum wichtigsten syntaktischen Mittel, das die gewohnte grammatische Syntax zu verdrängen und zu ersetzen in der Lage ist.”³²



Franz Mon, “Epitaph for Konrad Bayer”, 1966

Mon’s “Epitaph for Konrad Bayer”, from the series “non-tot I – IV”, was published in 1966 in the journal *et 2* and later in Solt’s anthology. It was probably written or re-named after Bayer committed suicide in 1964. It features only three different letters, which are typewritten and scattered repeatedly over the page: “n”, “o” and “t”. They are arranged in one big cross-shape which consists of numerous little crosses of five letters each. The death-theme is not only manifest visually and in the title, but is reinforced on the semantic level too: the words “tot”, “death”, and “not”, “distress”, “poverty” or “trouble”, can be formed from the given letter material, as well as “non”, which has a nihilistic ring to it, and “ton”, both “sound” and “clay”. Moreover, the shape of the letter “t” itself is reminiscent of a cross, “n” is the mathematical symbol for the unknown, and “o” suggests both nothingness and

³¹ Franz Mon, “An eine Säge denken”, p. 35.

³² Franz Mon, “Über konkrete Poesie”, pp. 136 - 137.

sounds of mourning, as Solt has indicated.³³ The poem diffuses sadness, a sense of loss and suffering, and the numerous “t”s scattered over the page conjure up the image of a churchyard with iron crosses. Distress, death, nothingness and suffering are all economically suggested semantically, visually and structurally.

Structure here reflects the complexity of suicide, the impossibility of finding one satisfactory linear narrative that accounts for the intricate web of causes and effects and possible explanations. There is no such thing as one ultimate explanation, Mon seems to suggest, and offers instead a multifaceted convoluted juxtaposition of diverging possible readings. Here, Mon has come close to achieving his aesthetic ideal: on the one hand, to reduce and concentrate the language elements drastically so as to explore the most basic layers and strata of language, and on the other hand, to generate a complex network of interrelated signs and to allow for numerous possible relationships between them:

[...] einerseits durch Reduktion der Beziehungen die unterste Grenze sprachlicher Information zu erreichen, andererseits die Elemente so zu differenzieren und zu komplizieren, daß dem entstehenden Zeichenkomplex keine Wahrnehmung mehr gewachsen ist.³⁴

10.4 The Technological Paradigm: On Typewriters and Tape-Recorders

The discovery of the qualities of surface was also linked to a more profane phenomenon: the spread and cheap availability of the typewriter. Many concrete poets were highly dependent on the structural possibilities opened up by the typewriter, so much so that some even called their poetry typewriter-poems.³⁵ It was the typewriter which allowed the poets to position the letters precisely and accurately and to place them on the page exactly where they wanted them, cheaply and at home. Considering that the investigation of space and surface is one of the chief concerns of concrete poetry, this fact should not be underestimated: while the typewriter had been patented as early as 1874, its widespread use was not common until the 1950s –

³³ Cf. Mary Ellen Solt, “English Spanish Word Gloss and Comments”. In: *Concrete Poetry. A World View*, p. 266.

³⁴ Franz Mon, “Über konkrete Poesie”, p. 137.

³⁵ Gerhard Rühm for instance called a series of his poems written between 1954 and 1957 “schreibmaschinenideogramme”.

which coincides exactly with the emergence of concrete poetry.³⁶ Mon openly pays his tribute to the device, claiming that it not only liberated the concrete poets from the too expensive dependency on the typesetters, but also allowed them more flexibility than setting:

Solche basale Nutzung der einzelnen Letter war möglich nur dank der massenweisen und also billigen Verbreitung der zur Handlichkeit entwickelten Schreibmaschine. Mit ihr hatten die Autoren ein gelenkiges Instrument an der Hand, das sie nicht nur von der – gewöhnlich zu teuren – Abhängigkeit vom Setzer befreite; ihre Mechanik ermöglichte, im Gegensatz zu den viel starrerem Gegebenheiten des Satzes, die präzise Positionierung des Schriftzeichens an beliebiger Stelle auf der Fläche, aber auch die Streuung mit gestuften Graden der optischen Verdichtung.³⁷

As in Apollinaire's and Marinetti's cases, it is yet again a technological invention that plays a significant role as a catalyst for new artistic methods: it is very likely that many poets were directly inspired by the typewriter to experiment with space, position and layout. Simultaneously, it facilitates immediate, affordable and direct effectuation.

The general significance of technology for neo-avant-garde experiments is equally pertinent in another instance of dependency between genre and equipment: sound poetry and the tape recorder. Richard Kostelanetz proclaims:

One post-WWII development that had a radical effect on text-sound art was the common availability of both the sound amplifier and the tape recorder, and these two technologies together did more than anything else to separate "contemporary" endeavors from earlier "modern" work.³⁸

At the beginning of the 1950s, the first consumer-compatible tape recorder was launched on the market, and in 1953, sound poets discovered and started to explore the creative potential of the new medium.³⁹ Lentz, in his study of sound poetry after

³⁶ The typewriter was invented and patented by Christopher L. Sholes, employee of the Remington gun- and sawing machine factory. Shole's typewriter also introduced the QWERTY-keyboard, which is still a standard today.

³⁷ Franz Mon, "Wortschrift Bildschrift". In: *Visuelle Poesie. TEXT+KRITIK. Zeitschrift für Literatur. Sonderband*, p. 13.

³⁸ Richard Kostelanetz, "Text Sound Art: a Survery". At: <http://www.ubu.com/papers/kostelanetz.html>.

³⁹ Françoise Dufrêne was the first person to deploy the tape recorder for artistic purposes. Cf. Michael Lentz, *Lautpoesie/ musik nach 1945*, vol. 1.

1945, speaks of a paradigmatic change that came about with the new technology, a change which made possible a whole new range of experiments with pre-recorded and thus manipulable sound.⁴⁰

Mon too was preoccupied with sound poetry and articulatory experiments, as well as with experimental radio plays. He argues that explorations of the nature of sound and spoken language were lifted to a new technologically enhanced level when the magnetic tape recorder became available and affordable, and allowed for various manipulations of the recorded material that had been impossible before. For the first time, sounds, detached from time and space, their real-time performance and their place of origin, could be edited and manipulated:

Zum erstenmal ist der Zeitverlauf von gesprochener Sprache dem poetischen Experiment zugänglich geworden außerhalb der strengen musikalischen Zeitmessung. Zum erstenmal ist die emotionelle Qualität einer Stimme außerhalb einer bestimmten Bühnenaufführung und unabhängig vom semantischen Wert verfügbar geworden.⁴¹

Sound too became proper material in the full sense of the word: spoken language and other human sounds could now be cut, pasted, superimposed, slowed down, speeded up, mixed with past and present material; the pitch could be altered, the tone manipulated, echo added. Simultaneity of different layers of sounds became possible, sounds could be subjected to montage, they could be reversed, they could be dissected. Sounds captured and frozen with the help of technological equipment, Mon writes, thus became concrete material that could be collected by the author in the streets, like the reality fragments that featured once in historical avant-garde collages and montages:

Wie einst Kurt Schwitters sich nur zu bücken brauchte, um Fahrscheine, Schuhsolen, Bruchstücke des Alltags als Material für seine Collagebilder

⁴⁰ The launch of the tape recorder even generated a new sub-genre, “poésie sonore”, which depended entirely on sound recording equipment. Its inventor Henri Chopin writes: “The genre poésie sonore holds the exclusive distinction of being created as an artistic result of the invention of the tape recorder. [...] Poésie sonore is a tape medium in which the composer breaks down the phonetic and sonic characteristics of the voice, either speaking or singing, and composes works consisting of these pre-recorded vocal micro-particles.” Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 162.

⁴¹ Franz Mon, “An eine Säge denken”, p. 35.

aufzusammeln, so liegt das konkrete Sprechmaterial praktisch auf der Straße.⁴²

To a certain degree, Mon's dissections of the deepest, finest strata of sound on such minuscule and micro-articulatory levels might also be the artistic result of, or at least inspired by, the opportunities opened up by new sound processing technologies:

Die experimentelle Fragestellung gilt sowohl den Schichten (Parametern), aus denen Sprachgebilde bestehen – z. B. Melodie, Tonhöhe, Tonstärke, Tempo eines Sprechverlaufs –, wie den kleinsten möglichen Elementen, wie den kompositorischen Großformen bzw. den Kompositionsprinzipien, mit denen Texte, welchen Umfangs auch immer, gebildet werden können.⁴³

10.5 Movement as Metaphor

Another pertinent concern of Mon's is the theme of movement, which he pursues on different conceptual levels: firstly, he is preoccupied with the optical evocation of motion, as in Azeredo's "velocidade" or in kinetic art. Secondly, Mon tries to instigate mental movement in his recipients, who are continually forced to break with habitual ways of reception while confronted with open textual structures.⁴⁴ Lastly, his works require literal eye movements in the process of perception when the recipient is trying to assimilate the inherent dynamics of the multilinear and spatially arranged letter material. In 1960, Mon's pursuit of the theme crystallised into a whole volume dedicated to its exploration: together with Walter Höllerer and Manfred de la Motte, he edited a collection of documents and interpretations about poetry, fine art, music and architecture, thematically subsumed under the leitmotif of movement, called *movens. Dokumente und Analysen zur Dichtung, bildenden Kunst, Musik, Architektur*.⁴⁵ Friedrich W. Block writes about that project:

⁴² Franz Mon, "Hörspiele werden gemacht". In: *Franz Mon. TEXT UND KRITIK. Zeitschrift für Literatur*, pp. 52-53.

⁴³ Franz Mon, "An eine Säge denken", p. 33.

⁴⁴ Friedrich W. Block points out the similarities between Mon's conception of movement and Eco's notion of the open work: "Umberto Eco's book 'the open artwork' appeared two years later with a corresponding opinion: The open artwork is produced most consistently when the activity of awareness and interpretation of those who produce and receive the work can be conceptually expected, and it becomes an 'artwork in movement'." Friedrich W. Block, "Digital poetics or On the evolution of experimental media poetry". At: <http://www.netzliteratur.net/block/p0et1cs.html>.

⁴⁵ Franz Mon (ed.), *movens. Dokumente und Analysen zur Dichtung, bildenden Kunst, Musik, Architektur*. Like many other avant-gardists, he also founded his own publishing house in 1963 – Typos Verlag, which was dedicated to the advancement of avant-garde literature.

The literary perspective of this enterprise was aimed at formulating experimental poetics in such a way as to embrace the complete arts with the main theme of movement. Essentially it was all about the esthetic production and processing of sign processes.⁴⁶

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Franz Mon, "sinks", 1959

One poem in particular illustrates Mon's pertinent concern with movement: "sinks", part of a series of poems called "artikulationen" written in 1959, ironically thematises the movement of the recipient's eyes on his or her journey through the poem. The poem consists of a vertical column of words which is intersected by a horizontal line. The vertical column is headed by "sinks", reminiscent both of the German verb "sinken" and the English "to sink". The activity of sinking is performed literally in the process of reception: as the recipient's eyes move downwards to follow the column, they sink along with the words, which themselves seem to subside and fall, especially in lines 5 and 6, which read:

⁴⁶ Friedrich W. Block, "Digital poetics or On the evolution of experimental media poetry". This collection, which comprises images, theoretical texts, poems, scores and architectural sketches, and features contributions by authors ranging from Gertrude Stein, Gerhard Rühm, John Cage, Öywind Fahlström, Kurt Schwitters and Emmett Williams to Dylan Thomas, Paul Valéry and Peter Weiß, was interdisciplinary, purposefully transgressing genre limits and habitual taxonomic categories. Its contributions were ordered according to thematic issues such as experiment, sign qualities, material, concretion, reduction, order, unpredictability, and recipient activity. Kinetic painting as well as abstract film, electronic music, modern architecture, concrete and other experimental poetry and Mon's sound poems were thematised amongst other things.

sin

ks

The words iconically act out their meaning, they effectuate their semantics visually, as in many Futurist examples. The word “links”, “left”, is positioned at the far-left side of the poem as the first word of the horizontal line. These leitmotif words call attention to the position of the reader’s eye movement, as Emmett Williams has pointed out:

The key words reflect the activity of the reader’s eye on the page. When links is read, the eye is at the left. The eye sinks as it goes down the vertical column. Where the vertical and horizontal meet, only the s of the original two words remains.⁴⁷

“links” and “sinks” share the sequence “inks” and are hence similar in sound and form. Moreover, the two key words are subjected to gradual articulatory transformation: “sinks” metamorphoses into “sak”, “kas”, “saks”, “akse”, “naks”, “kseno”, “okse”, “okt”, “okto”, “nokt”, “okton”, “tok”, “kot”, which are all reminiscent of existing, mostly German words, evoking “sack”, “cheese”, “Saxon”, “axis”, “stranger”, “ox”, “eight”, “night”, and “excrement”. In the horizontal line, all words apart from “links” are themed around the letter “s”. They read “seks”, “sinks”, “sint”, “sud”, “sas”, “sa”, “s”, “sol”, “sols”, “slos”, “slost”, “slos”, “los”, “lss” and “lst”. Concepts alluded to include “six”/“sex”, “it sinks”, “they are”, “south” or “liquid”, “sun”, “must”, “lottery ticket”, “to start”, “lost” and, fittingly for the last word in the sequence, and again calling attention to the position of the eyes in the construct, “last”. The letter “s”, which also features prominently in the middle of the poem where the vertical and the horizontal elements intersect, and which differentiates “links” from “sinks”, crystallises as another leitmotif.

The evoked meanings resulting from the articulative alterations are not unified by a causal or logical relationship, but by the formal and phonetic analogies of their material. Again, it is not the semantics which control the material, but the other way round: the material determines semantics. Mon writes:

⁴⁷ Emmett Williams in: *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*.

Da alles schon artikuliert ist, muß das Artikulieren an seine Grenze, seine erste Schwelle geführt und das kleinste Moment erfaßt werden, das isoliert nichts mehr besagt und doch das Ganze aufbaut, seien es Phoneme, Rasterpunkte, Sinustöne oder was sonst. Das Material büßt alle Schemata, alle verabredeten Bedeutungen und eingewohnte Beziehungen ein: es gilt als durch und durch faktisch.⁴⁸

The articulatory process itself, which disappears in message-orientated communication, is of intrinsic value and significance here, and attention is drawn yet again to the minuscule components of language and their physical formation as a means by which to eclipse predetermined meanings, schemes and conventions and to seek refuge in the ideologically impartial material realm of language.

⁴⁸ Franz Mon, "Analyse". In: *movens. Dokumente und Analysen zur Dichtung, bildenden Kunst, Musik, Architektur*, p. 90.

11. FROM CONCRETE TO DIGITAL: THE TRAJECTORY OF MAX BENSE

11.1 Bense and the Stuttgart Nexus

Many ends of concrete poetry meet and are driven to their most radical consequences in the aesthetic framework of the German scholar, philosopher and poet Max Bense. Bense was influential in the concrete poetry movement on a number of levels: to begin with, his inquiries into aesthetic, mathematical, technological and philosophical questions and their interrelatedness had a profound impact on many poets. Furthermore, his preoccupation with and advancement of not yet established or new theories significant for the poetics of concrete, such as Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics and Claude Shannon's information theory, were also crucial for the movement, as were his publishing and gallery enterprises and his general efforts at networking within the concrete microcosm. Finally, Bense initiated the very first experiments with artificial, machine-made computer poetry, which were, he claims, both a consequence and effectuation of his aesthetic explorations, and make him a threshold figure epitomising the transition from concrete to digital poetry.

Bense was the central figure of the *Stuttgarter Gruppe*, an open, fluctuating group gathered around him, his students and staff at the 'Technische Hochschule' in Stuttgart.¹ Amongst its core members were the poets Reinhard Döhl and Helmut Heißenbüttel and the typographers Klaus Burkhardt and Hansjörg Mayer. Many others were loosely affiliated with the group, and Döhl, the most diligent chronicler

¹ The technical college was turned into 'Universität Stuttgart' at a later point. The students and academic staff were usually referred to as *Stuttgarter Schule*, whereas the poets and artists surrounding them were designated as *Stuttgarter Gruppe*. Reinhard Döhl maintains "daß aber dennoch getrennt werden solle zwischen 'Stuttgarter Schule', worunter wir künftig jene Mitarbeiter rechnen wollten, die im Sinne exakter Ästhetik oder Semiotik geforscht und geschrieben haben und schreiben, und 'Stuttgarter Gruppe', der dann die der Zeitschrift 'augenblick', der Publikationsfolge 'rot', der Studiengalerie oder sonst Bense verbundenen Künstler zuzurechnen seien, was Autoren, bildende Künstler, Komponisten, aber auch Übersetzer und Interpreten einschließen sollte." Reinhard Döhl, "Stuttgarter Gruppe oder Einkreisung einer Legende". At: <http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/stuschul.htm>.

of its historiography, assigns Ernst Jandl, Ludwig Harig and Franz Mon to its wider circle as well.²

Stuttgart was a nexus, a “geistiges Zentrum”, as Elisabeth Walther claims, where many ends of the concrete movement met, and Bense and the other Stuttgart poets persistently established contacts to, corresponded with and visited other concrete groups, individuals and institutions, thus vitally stimulating the exchange of aesthetic positions and principles within the concrete microcosm.³ The Stuttgart poets were acquainted with virtually all other important concrete protagonists, including those at the ‘Hochschule für Gestaltung’ in Ulm, where Bense too taught as a visiting professor between 1953 and 1958 and where he met Bill, Gomringer and Pignatari. Moreover, Bense was affiliated with the additional members of the *Noigandres* group, particularly with Haroldo, with the Paris-based *Spatialists* Pierre and Ilse Garnier, the *Wiener Gruppe*, most notably Rühm, who participated in many Stuttgart-based events and readings, the poets associated with the *Darmstädter Kreis* Diter Rot, Daniel Spoerri, Claus Bremer and Emmett Williams, the Czech concrete poets Josef Hiršal, Bohumila Grögerová, Ladislav Novák and Jiří Kolář, and the Japanese poets Seiichi Niikuni and Hiroo Kamimura as well as many others.⁴

The close interrelatedness of and vital exchange between the different national groups and factions writing under the banner of concrete becomes very plain in the case of Stuttgart, and illustrates that concrete poetry is more than just a genre, style or mere formal method, and can indeed be considered as coherent – albeit a fluctuating and open one – international movement based on shared poetic principles

² Döhl points out that the *Stuttgarter Gruppe*, however, is not a group as strongly unified and structured as for instance the *Noigandres* group or the *Wiener Gruppe*. Cf. Reinhard Döhl, “Die sechziger Jahre in Stuttgart. Ein Exkurs”. At: <http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/stutt60.htm>.

Döhl has created a comprehensive internet reader featuring numerous articles on the *Stuttgarter Gruppe*, many of them written by himself and other affiliated persons. As can also be observed in other cases, the members of avant-garde groups are often the most assiduous chroniclers and historiographers of their own movements. At: <http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de>.

³ Elisabeth Walther, “Einleitung”. In: Max Bense, *Max Bense. Ausgewählte Schriften in vier Bänden. Band 1. Philosophie*. Edited by Elisabeth Walther. Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 1997, p. XXI.

⁴ The scope and importance of these international contacts becomes particularly evident in the following essays: Reinhard Döhl and Hiroo Kamimura, “Stuttgart - Japan und zurück oder Ein japanisch-deutscher Literatur- und Schriftwechsel”; Elisabeth Walther, “Die Beziehung von Haroldo de Campos zur deutschen konkreten Poesie, insbesondere zu Max Bense”; Bohumila Grögerová and Josef Hiršal, “Prag Stuttgart und zurück”; and Ilse and Pierre Garnier, “Max Bense und der Spatialismus”, all at: <http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de>.

and objectives.⁵ This notion also corresponds with most of the poets' self-perceptions and declarations. Not only did concrete poetry emerge more or less simultaneously in many different places of the world at the same time, indicating a prevalent cultural climate that called for a specific set of aesthetic strategies, as Gomringer and Rühm have pointed out, but also most concrete poets explicitly designated their works as concrete poetry, thus programmatically declaring affiliation to a broader international project stretching beyond the boundaries of their respective local or national groups. Although the different national groups, schools and individuals within the movement did have divergent and distinctive styles and priorities, and were partly only loosely in contact with other groups, they all shared enough common ground to assert their alliances with concrete principles. Jonathan Williams proclaims: "If there is such a thing as a world-wide movement in the art of poetry, Concrete is it."⁶ Moreover, as Pedro Reis has pointed out, concrete poetry does share qualities very similar to those used to qualify literary phenomena as movements in general, such as:

the existence of an artistic homogeneity determined by a collective consciousness and a theoretical agreement on the meanings and objectives of artistic production, the voluntary adherence to certain aesthetic values, the promulgation and defence of these values in programmatic manifestos, specific modes of production derived from the theoretical positions, the existence of groups of writers with their own vehicles for diffusing their ideas and texts (exhibitions, magazines, etc.), and more.⁷

The establishment of an independent network of publication and exhibition space was of particular, vital importance for the concrete poets, just as it was for the poets of the historical avant-garde. Virtually all groups had their own vehicles of distribution – journals, magazines, printing presses, gallery spaces and even publishing companies – in which they published, translated, exhibited and reviewed their own and each others' works. In the early years of the movement, the poets set up a self-supported and self-organised network of circulation, an independent infrastructure which, on the one hand, guaranteed them autonomy from cultural and

⁵ This notion does not contradict the spontaneous and initially independent emergence of concrete poetry: while the origins were independent, and indicated a certain internationally prevalent tendency, it was turned into a more coherent and structured organisation at a later point in time, when the participants discovered their shared concerns and common causes.

⁶ Quoted from Emmett Williams, "Foreword". In: *An anthology of concrete poetry*, p. vii.

⁷ Pedro Reis, "Concrete Poetry: A Generic Perspective", p. 291.

commercial institutions and mainstream demands, and, on the other hand, allowed them to be read in spite of being shunned by the official channels of publication.

Stahl interprets the phenomenon of self-publication, in tune with Bürger, as an attack upon the institution of art, its distribution mechanisms, and cultur industry in general. Moreover, he argues, artists create their own nets of distribution to liberate themselves both from social pressures and market demands as well as from potential restrictions imposed on the level of aesthetics and content.⁸ However, while this argument is surely valid to a certain degree, self-publication, both in the historical and the neo-avant-garde, was not always a purely ideological choice, nor was it necessarily always an attack upon the institution of art. Often, it was the result of sheer necessity: the bigger publishing companies became interested in the works of the concretists only about fifteen years after the emergence of the movement, and until then the poets had to publish themselves also for the pragmatic reason that nobody else wanted to. It was only in the late 1960s that concrete poetry was recognised by the mainstream, as bigger publishing houses started to bring out the works of selected concretists and a flood of anthologies began to appear.

Bense too was an enthusiastic self-publisher: he established two major literary magazines and an experimental gallery at the 'Technische Hochschule', where he taught philosophy and theory of science from 1950 to 1978. From 1955 to 1961, Bense produced the *augenblick*, one of the most important journals in post-war Germany.⁹ The subtitle read "zeitschrift für tendenz und experiment", and Bense indeed did try to create a forum for both explicitly politically committed and experimental literature.¹⁰ From 1960 onwards he edited the publication *rot* together with Walther, which was to be an important vehicle for the introduction and advancement of new theories, particularly Peircean semiotics, before they were popularised by Eco.¹¹ In 1959 Bense established the 'Studiengalerie', a University

⁸ Cf. Enno Stahl, *Anti-Kunst und Abstraktion in der literarischen Moderne (1909- 1933)*, p. 15.

⁹ Also in 1955, Alfred Andersch launched his equally important journal *Texte und Zeichen*.

¹⁰ Bense printed Gomringer's manifesto "vom vers zur konstellation" in 1955 and the results of the first experiments with artificial stochastic computer poetry by Theo Lutz in 1959 for instance, as well as numerous other authors ranging from Jean Genet, Francis Ponge, Raymond Queneau and Helmut Heißenbüttel to Gertrude Stein and Jean Paul Sartre. For a complete overview cf. <http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/augenblick1.htm>.

¹¹ Not surprisingly, the 'Technische Hochschule' was also the venue for academic study of both contemporary experimental tendencies and the historical avant-garde: Bense established the

gallery space designed as venue for experimental arts and poetry. During the winter term 1959/1960, he organised what is presumed to be the first exhibition of concrete poetry world-wide, featuring works of the *Noigandres* group amongst others.¹²

11.2 The Pursuit of Objectivity

Throughout his career, Bense was preoccupied with the study of philosophy, mathematics, technology and theory of science as well as with information theory, semiotics and cybernetics.¹³ In a truly interdisciplinary manner, he tried to establish an exact, scientific and objective branch of aesthetics, by means of applying mathematical and information theoretical premises to the study of “aesthetic objects”. Essentially, his objective was to shift the assessment, discussion and ultimately also the production of literature from an emotional basis towards a purely rational one. Bense writes:

Denn ich habe immer die Auffassung vertreten, daß Literatur heute und im Sinne einer sprachlichen Realität stärker auf einem theoretischen, als auf einem emotionalen Hintergrund verständlich und wirksam wird.¹⁴

In the wake of the linguistic turn, the concept of the linguistic sign became much more refined, complex and sophisticated, both as a result of the resurrection of Peirce’s theory of the triadic nature of the sign and its augmentation by Charles

‘Arbeitskreis Frankreich’, in which works by contemporary French poets, thinkers and artists were discussed, and Döhl wrote his dissertation on Hans Arp, which was published by Metzler in 1967.

¹² This exhibition was followed by “Konkrete Poesie international” in 1965 and “Konkrete Poesie international 2” in 1970. The ‘Studiengalerie’ was also the venue for the first display of computer graphics in an art context in 1965, when Georg Nees’ work was on display.

¹³ The OED defines cybernetics as “the science of communications and automatic control systems in both machines and living things”, but the American Society for Cybernetics presents a myriad of diverging definitions on its homepage. The term was coined by the mathematician Norbert Wiener in 1948, derived from *kybernetes*, Greek for “pilot” and “steersman”, in his book *Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. Cybernetics grew out of Claude Shannon’s information theory. It is an interdisciplinary science, crossing information theory, biology, physics, and behavioral studies. Cybernetics studies information processing, organisation, communication and control in complex systems by focusing on feedback mechanisms in animals, men and machines. It is applicable to any domain in which processes of communication occur, ranging from computer and information sciences, natural and social sciences, to politics, education and management. Cf. <http://www.asc-cybernetics.org/foundations/definitions.htm>.

Bense purchased a copy of Wiener’s book in 1950 and strongly believed in the power of cybernetics ever since, hoping especially that it would help overcome the boundaries between humanities and natural sciences.

¹⁴ Max Bense, “Über die Realität der Literatur”. In: *Theoretische Positionen zur Konkreten Poesie*, p. 3.

Morris, and of the further development of linguistic studies and the emergence of Structuralism, which in turn reinstated de Saussure's findings.¹⁵ This progression in the field of theory left a distinctive mark on poetic productions. In the manifesto "zur lage", written in 1964, Döhl and Bense proclaim:

das erzeugen ästhetischer gebilde erfolgt nicht mehr aus gefühlswängen [...] sondern auf der basis bewußter theorien [...]. der künstler heute realisiert zustände auf der basis von bewußter theorie und bewußtem experiment.¹⁶

This statement indicates unmistakably that the poets consider their works as objective, methodological, theory-based inquires into the nature of language, signs and communication, and that they vigorously reject the notion of the emotionally driven, romantic, instinctive and intuitive creator. Imagination is replaced with theory, emotion with method, intuition and creativity with systematic experiments. Ultimately, Bense and Döhl call for the abandonment of the perceiving, feeling, observing I – essentially the subjective approach itself – for the sake of approximating scientific objectivity.

The preoccupation with objectivity seems to be a general concern of concrete poets, though its significance varies in different poetic frameworks. Bense and Döhl are certainly the most radical pursuers of objectivity and scientific exactitude, but Gomringer too emphasised the importance of method, system and structure, and experiments with stochastic, permutational and combinatorial structures can also be observed in the works of the *Wiener Gruppe* and in those of many other concrete factions.¹⁷

The reasons for this rigorous quest for objectivity and the prominence of method are manifold: firstly, this phenomenon is a consequence of the notion of literature as

¹⁵ Bense was keen not only to deploy Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics in his textual analyses, but also to establish semiotics into academic discourse. Even though Peirce elaborated his theory about the triadic nature of the sign between 1867 and 1868 already, it was never published during his lifetime and became popular in Germany only in the late 60s of the following century. Bense and Walther dedicated three whole volumes of the publication *rot* to Peirce's texts: no. 20 (1965), no. 44 (1971) and no. 52 (1978).

¹⁶ Max Bense, Reinhard Döhl, "zur lage". In: *konkrete poesie deutschsprachiger autoren. anthologie*, p. 166.

¹⁷ Cf. for instance Gomringer's poems "fisch" and his "baum-wind" series, as well as Achleitner's "veränderung. eine studie".

experiment, as research, as quasi-scientific investigation into the nature of communication, language, signs and the codes and structures that govern their usage. The poets not only see themselves as poets, but as explorers in search of insights and answers. There is an epistemological dimension to their quest, they claim, an interest in cognitive results. Adorno too argues that the idea of the artistic experiment implies “die bewußte Verfügung über Materialien, wider bewußtlos organischen Prozedierens”, and that experimental strategies are the corollary of the transfer of scientific principles into the realm of art.¹⁸ As a consequence of this conception, both Bense and Döhl decisively subscribe to a progressive notion of literature:

wir sprechen noch einmal von einer progressiven ästhetik bzw. poetik, deren bewußte anwendung ein fortschreiten der literatur demonstriert, wie es schon immer den fortschritt der wissenschaft gab.¹⁹

Bense distinguishes between a conventional notion of literature orientated along traditional lines as opposed to a progressive version, which he defines as “neu auftauchende Merkmale und Elemente” and the “Entdeckung und Erprobung von solchen”.²⁰ Conventional literature serves the purpose of communication and entertainment, whereas experimental literature strives for intellectual insights, Bense maintains:

Wir beschränken uns hier darauf, hervorzuheben, daß im konventionellen Literaturbegriff die gesellschaftlich-kommunikative, im progressiven Literaturbegriff die intellektuell-experimentierende Funktion der Literatur stärker betont wird. In diesem Sinne berücksichtigt die gesellschaftlich-kommunikative Funktion der Literatur z.B. Probleme der “Unterhaltung”, während die intellektuell-experimentierende an “Erkenntnis” interessiert ist.²¹

Furthermore, the emphasis on objectivity is congruent with the focus on the material, autonomous linguistic world and the notion of language as a concrete object with physically perceptible dimensions. This conception implies that, as an object, language should be measurable and classifiable with exact, mathematical and

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 62.

¹⁹ Max Bense, Reinhard Döhl, “zur lage”, p. 166.

²⁰ Max Bense, “Konkrete Poesie”. In: *Manuskripte. Zeitschrift für Literatur, Kunst, Kritik*, vol. 11, June/September 1965. At: http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/bense_konkret2.htm.

²¹ Ibid.

scientific parameters, and that it can be subjected to experiments and tests just like other material or numerical signs too.

Moreover, in keeping with Ball, some concrete poets consider the material realm as the last untainted resort of language, as pure, innocent and unblemished territory to which they can withdraw and seek refuge in times when humanist values and ethical convictions are shaken to the core. They perceive declarations and assertions of any nature as problematic, the subjective itself becomes suspicious and narration, anecdote and often content itself are treated with apprehension or avoided completely. In the early 70s, when the golden age of concrete poetry had already passed, a paradigmatic change occurred in German literature: an upsurge of autobiographical and confessional literature emerged, in which the subjective was reinstated with vigour.²² Gomringer recalls that a sense of relief was in the air, finally, writers and critics felt, one was allowed to tell stories again:

es darf wieder gedichtet werden – scheint einer der stossseufzer der erleichterung im jahre 1973 zu sein. die dürren jahre der “formalistischen spielereien” – eine beliebte wendung simpler gedankenlosigkeit mancher kritiker – seien, gott sei dank, vorüber. anschauungen und meinungen dürfen wieder in althergebrachter form zum ausdruck gebracht werden.²³

²² Gomringer in particular emphasises that concrete poetry was a phenomenon limited to a confined historical period, which ended in the late 60s. Cf. Eugen Gomringer, “am ende der konkreten poesie?”. In: *theorie der konkreten poesie. Texte und manifeste 1954 – 1997*, p. 86.

Other poets, such as Julien Blaine, Jean-Francois Bory, Gerhard Rocher and Jochen Gerz argue that concrete poetry was frozen by anthologisation and stifled by its sudden institutionalisation and popularity, that it did not survive the plunge into the mainstream and its appropriation by the culture industry. They were fed up with nepotism, clique-structures and “anthological imperialism”, or found that the form was exhausted and too restrictive. Many thought that the limited possibilities within the strict confinements of concrete frameworks were sufficiently explored, and that it had become necessary to broaden the experimental field again. Cf. Nicholas Zurbrugg’s opinion poll about the death of concrete poetry in: *Stereo Headphones. An occasional magazine of the new poetries*, vol. 1, 1970, nos. 2 & 3. Klaus Peter Dencker maintains that concrete poetry merely changed form and name and transformed and branched out into less rigid and more boldly genre-crossing forms, such as visual poetry. Cf. Klaus Peter Dencker, *Text-Bilder. Visuelle Poesie International. Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*. Köln: M. DuMont Schauberg, 1972.

Yet another explanation for the gradual disbanding of the concrete poetry movement is that the cultural climate reached dramatic turning points yet again in the mid-late 1960s and in the early 1970s. In the wake of the events of 1968, literature became increasingly more politicised. Furthermore, the excitement about new technologies was fading away, and there was a growing desire for narrative and stories again. Many felt that in the early 1970s, the ban on content and narration after the Holocaust was finally lifted, and rational, objective and explicitly political attitudes gave way to a new celebration of subjectivity, individuality and inwardness, resulting in a flood of autobiographical and confessional literature. Cf. Ralf Schnell, “Die Literatur der Bundesrepublik”. In: Wolfgang Beutin et al, *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984, pp. 487-565.

²³ Eugen Gomringer, “am ende der konkreten poesie?”, p. 87.

Lastly, the aspiration to objectivity in poetry reinstates the importance of science and technology once again, for this phenomenon can both be considered as a transfer of scientific methods to the realm of poetry and as a reflection upon the increasing technologisation of society, a repercussion of the fact that technology and its rational procedures permeate deeper and deeper into the everyday sphere of the individual. Unlike more technology-sceptical critics, Bense believes that technological developments do not result in a regression of the capacity of intellectual imagination, but instead in a refinement of aesthetic and philological perception, in a substantial sharpening of the awareness of micro-aesthetic structures: “das feld der poesie ist weiter geworden in dem maße, wie unsere augen und ohren empfindlicher wurden für mikroästhetische strukturen und differenzierungen.”²⁴ Bense’s notion echoes that of Walter Benjamin, who argued that film and the camera, rather than dulling apperception, actually sharpened and deepened it by calling attention to usually hidden and subsidiary details, thereby bringing to the fore the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis has uncovered the urge-driven unconscious:

[Die Kamara] hat Dinge isoliert und zugleich analysierbar gemacht, die vordem unbemerkt im breiten Strom des Wahrgenommenen mitschwammen. Der Film hat in der ganzen Breite der optischen Merkwelt, und nun auch der akustischen, eine ähnliche Vertiefung der Apperzeption zur Folge gehabt.²⁵

Moreover, Bense strongly believed that experimental literature should not only acutely be aware of, but creatively annex what was happening in the technological domain and adequately reflect and respond to the latest developments, as Hermann Rotermund has pointed out.²⁶ Aesthetic developments should not fall behind developments in other spheres of knowledge: just like researchers in the domain of the natural sciences, explorers in the field of aesthetics too should aspire to be as up to date as possible.

²⁴ Max Bense, Reinhard Döhl, “zur lage”, p. 165.

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit”. In: Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.2. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schwegphäuser. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974, p. 498.

²⁶ Hermann Rotermund, “Keine Anrufung des großen Bären. Max Bense als Wegbereiter für Konkrete Poesie und Netzliteratur” [Radio feature produced by Radio Bremen in 2001]. At: http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/01_08_20bense_rb.html.

11.3 The Aesthetic State as Unpredictable Information

Bense's *Einführung in die informationstheoretische Ästhetik. Grundlegung und Anwendung in der Texttheorie*, written in 1969, represents an attempt to insert techniques and methods derived from science, especially from information theory, into the arena of aesthetics. In this volume, Bense aims to establish purely rational, material and numerical values for describing and analysing "aesthetic states" of "artistic objects":

Die "Informationsästhetik", die mit semiotischen und mathematischen Mitteln arbeitet, kennzeichnet die "ästhetischen Zustände", die an Naturgegenständen, künstlerischen Objekten, Kunstwerken oder Design beobachtbar sind, durch Zahlenwerte und Zeichenklassen [...].²⁷

Bense combines semiotics with methods derived from stochastics, statistics, information theory, physics, signal and communication theory as well as with epistemological and ontological considerations.²⁸ This undertaking, Bense claims, is motivated by the desire to establish mathematical exactitude and objective parameters in artistic discourse and thus to eradicate "das allgemeine spekulative Kunstgeschwätz der Kritik" and "den pädagogischen Irrationalismus unserer Akademien".²⁹ Essentially, his objective is to replace the *Geschmacksurteil* with exact stocktaking of the given material facts:

So ist diese Ästhetik als eine objektive und materiale Ästhetik gedacht, die nicht mit spekulativen, sondern mit rationalen Mitteln arbeitet. [...] Es handelt sich nicht um eine "Gefallensästhetik", sondern um eine "Konstatierungsästhetik", in der "ästhetische Zustände", ihre "Repertoires" und ihre "Träger" "objektiv", "material" und "exakt" in der abstrakten

²⁷ Max Bense, *Einführung in die informationstheoretische Ästhetik. Grundlegung und Anwendung in der Texttheorie*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1969, p. 7.

²⁸ Text statistics, for instance, are used to study the frequency of certain words like conjunctions, or words with a certain amount of syllables, or otherwise specified linguistic phenomena within a text. For example, Bense determined the number of visual descriptions in a text by Alfred Andersch and found that it was unusually high, by counting the number of visual descriptions and setting them in relation to the total number of words. This quota was then compared to other authors, whose visual factor was considerably lower. Cf. Hermann Rotermund, "Keine Anrufung des großen Bären. Max Bense als Wegbereiter für Konkrete Poesie und Netzliteratur".

²⁹ Bense writes: "Der ästhetische Zustand eines Textes ist ein spezifisch singulärer Zustand der Gegebenheit, Wahrnehmbarkeit und Anordnung seiner sprachlichen Elemente. Sofern es ein sprachlicher Zustand ist, kann er nur sprachlich realisiert sein, d.h. er gehört ganz und gar der sprachlichen Eigenwelt der Texte an, nicht der sprachlichen Außenwelt, also nicht dem, worüber gesprochen wird." Max Bense, *Einführung in die informationstheoretische Ästhetik*, p. 8.

Sprache einer allgemeinen rationalen empirischen Theorie beschrieben werden.³⁰

Bense's aesthetic theory seems to be a radicalised, hard-science enhanced version of Formalism: the aesthetic state of a text, as defined by Bense, is a specific singular condition depending upon the distribution, perceptibility and arrangement of its linguistic elements, that is it depends solely on autonomous text-intrinsic qualities.³¹ The aesthetic state of an object, Bense claims, can be measured by determining the mathematically detectable relationship between order and complexity [O/C], which represents the basis for its numerical assessment.³² Aesthetic states can thus be defined by their degree of unexpected, surprising occurrence of words:

Was aber schließlich den *ästhetischen Zustand* des Textes anbetrifft, so muß man davon ausgehen, daß es sich, wie aus den Theoremen der statistischen Informationsästhetik folgt, bei ihm um einen Zustand *unwahrscheinlicher, stark selektierter, nichttrivialer* Wortfolgen handelt.³³

This notion is a direct transfer of Claude E. Shannon's definition of information as unexpected, unpredictable news into the realms of the aesthetic. Information theory was conceived by Shannon in 1948, and deals with the mathematical study of the coding of information and how rapidly such information can be transmitted. Shannon established the still valid five-part model of communication systems, which comprises the elements source, encoder, channel, decoder and destination. He concentrated above all on the aspect of predictability: for Shannon, information consists of a set of symbols that contain unpredictable news. He believed that everything that was predictable was redundant and could be left out, as in the sentence: "only infrmatn esentil to understandn mst b tranmitd." New information is thus equated with uncertainty. The information source, according to Shannon, is someone or something that generates information in an essentially stochastic, random manner. The semantic meaning of information consequently plays no role in his theory, only its degree of predictability.³⁴ Bense directly annexed and adopted this notion by defining aesthetic states as improbable, unpredictable sequences of words.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 104

³² Cf. Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 110.

³⁴ Cf. <http://www.lucent.com/minds/infotheory/>.

He deployed statistics to determine the extent of unusual words in a given text: with the help of a frequency dictionary, which statistically establishes the most frequently used words of a certain language, he drew up hit-lists of the most regularly used expressions, and could thus numerically record deviations from the norm.³⁵

11.4 Repercussions, Internationality and Permutation

The impact of developments not only in the technological sphere but also in the theoretical one on concrete poetry can hardly be underestimated.³⁶ Bense's own theories were not only put to work in the manifestos and concrete productions of the *Stuttgarter Gruppe*, but served as stimuli for many other poets, particularly the *Noigandres* group, and also Gomringer, who writes:

Benses theoretischer Überbau wurde von mir sehr beachtet und teilweise auch als hilfreich verstanden. [...] Ich und andere Konkrete Dichter lernten wohl am meisten über Bense die Begriffe der Informationsästhetik kennen [...].³⁷

In the manifesto "zur lage", Bense and Döhl place themselves firmly within the poetic discourse of concrete poetry and incorporate concepts from Bense's aesthetic theories at the same time. In tune with other concrete manifestos, they acknowledge their debt to historical forerunners and proclaim the abandonment of the semantic message-orientated function and the interdisciplinary nature of concrete poetry:

[...] die grenzen zu anderen kunstgattungen (zur malerei, zur musik) verwischen sich immer mehr. [...] traditionell an die literaturrevolution der jahrhunderwende, der ersten jahrzehnte unseres jahrhunderts gebunden [...],

³⁵ Mostly, the first 100 words of a frequency dictionary make up 60% of a text, the first 1000 words make up 85% and the first 4000 97%. Hence it appears that almost 97% of the words we choose in a text are predetermined by frequency. Cf. Max Bense, *Einführung in die informationstheoretische Ästhetik*, p. 84.

³⁶ Thomas Kopferman notes the importance of theory too: "Daneben kann man Einflüsse – ähnlicher Rezeptionsweise und ebenfalls im Detail schwer nachweisbar – behaupten: der Semiotik (Peirce, Morris), der Informationstheorie (Bense) und der strukturellen Linguistik, schließlich der Philosophie, die den (strukturellen, semantischen) Weltbild-Charakter der Sprache betont (Humboldt, Sapir, Whorf, Hayakawa)." Thomas Kopfermann, "Literatur aus Sprache und sonst nichts". In: *Theoretische Positionen zur Konkreten Poesie*, pp. 9-10.

³⁷ Quoted from Oliver Herwig, *Wortdesign*, p. 111. Herwig points out too: "Auch Gomringer reagierte in seiner Poetik auf die neu in den Blick rückenden Theorien, indem er darin ausdrücklich kommunikationsästhetische und quasi-naturwissenschaftliche Aspekte aufnahm." *Ibid.*, p. 110.

ist poesie heute kein transportmittel mehr für zumeist fragwürdige ethische inhalte, kein rechtfertigungsvehikel mehr für weltanschaulichen unfug.³⁸

Döhl and Bense proclaim that the craftsman, the rational, systematic author, whose only concern is with a methodological reflection of the material dimension of language, has replaced the mystic “inhalts- und stimmungsjongleur”. Even though ethical obligations are to be replaced by aesthetic ones, Döhl and Bense nevertheless emphasise “ästhetische moral” and describe concrete poetry as “ästhetische negation gesellschaftlicher zustände, zivilisatorischer mängel,” in keeping with Bense’s concern both with “Tendenz” and experiment at the same time.³⁹ They explicitly incorporate the idea of aesthetic states as surprising, unpredictable arrangements both on a syntactical and a semantic level:

durch überraschende verteilungen in der syntaktischen und/oder semantischen dimension entsteht im wörtlichen sinne eine poesie der wörter, des setzkastens, der farben, der töne.⁴⁰

Moreover, their manifesto is infused with technological terminology, in an attempt to furnish it with a distinctively scientific quality: “experiment und theorie, demonstration, modell, muster, spiel, reduktion, permutation, iteration, random (störung und streuung), serie und struktur.”⁴¹ Döhl and Bense claim, amongst other things, that it is the fragmentation and dissection of linguistic elements which has the potential to uncover and put to work both the semantic and the aesthetic function of words:

simultanität der semantischen und ästhetischen funktion der wörter auf der grundlage gleichzeitiger ausnützung aller materialen dimensionen dieser sprachlichen elemente, die selbstverständlich auch als zerbrochene erscheinen können, in silben, laute, morpheme oder buchstaben, um die ästhetischen zustände der sprache in ihrer abhängigkeit von deren analytischen wie synthetischen möglichkeiten auszudrücken.⁴²

Additionally, Bense too considers concrete poetry to be a decidedly international phenomenon: iconic visual communication can be understood by anyone, and the

³⁸ Max Bense, Reinhard Döhl, “zur lage”, p. 165.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 165-166.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 166.

⁴² Max Bense, “konkrete poesie”.

fact that the structural arrangement and the visual dimension contribute to, and constitute a, vital part of the meaning of a concrete poem, makes aspects of it accessible even for people who do not speak the language in which it is written. This, and the fact that many poems actually comprise vocabulary taken from more than one language, further furnishes the poets' claim that concrete poetry is a truly international movement. Bense states:

dementsprechend trennt die konkrete poesie nicht die sprachen, sondern vereinigt, mischt sie. es liegt also in ihrer linguistischen intention, daß die konkrete poesie zum ersten mal eine echte internationale dichterische bewegung hervorgerufen hat.⁴³

ir

o
rio
roi
oro
orior
orion
rionoir
ronronron

ri

Max Bense, "tallose berge", 1965

One of Bense's very few pure concrete poems is the prime example for this assertion: "tallose berge", first published in Hansjörg Mayer's *futura 3* in 1965, consists of only four letters, "o", "r", "i" and "n", but deploys vocabulary taken from four different languages, Portuguese, French, Latin and German, including in the title, thus embracing a truly international spirit in its multilingual stock. The poem was composed with a dual function in mind: it was to be a concrete poem and an advertisement for the quatercentenary celebrations of Rio de Janeiro at the same time.

⁴³ Ibid.

Bense repeatedly emphasised the proximity of techniques of advertising and concrete poetry, because both use text design and typography and transmit part of their meaning via visual structures, presenting a text not only as intellectual-semantic phenomenon but also as a sensual-optical one.⁴⁴ However, he also clearly indicated why there is nevertheless a crucial difference: in advertisements, the visual dimension serves purely as vehicle and enhancement of the pragmatic formulation, whereas in concrete poetry, the aesthetic effect is an end in itself with semantic significance.⁴⁵

In “tallose berge”, both of these functions are united: form and structure support the semantic predications and are autonomous and self-sufficient at the same time. The shape of the poem iconically alludes to the mountain near Rio, the “valleyless mountain” Corcovado, rising above the bay of Guanabara like a sugar loaf. As Bense has suggested, “o” represents the sun above it, and “ronronron” onomatopoeically indicates the murmur of the sea below.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the exclamation “o” is also a classical apostrophical device – Rio de Janeiro is personified and directly addressed. With a minimum of material, a maximum of semantic fields derived from four different languages is covered. Since the poem is designed as a tribute and homage to Rio de Janeiro for its anniversary celebration, its elements can be interpreted as relating to Rio’s history: the choice of languages for instance indicate that the city was decisively shaped by Portuguese and French settlers, who continually fought over its possession. The “ir” in the left hand corner of the poem, Portuguese for “to go”, could point to the fact that Rio was founded by settlers, that its history began with people who came from far away and took possession of the land. The Portuguese Gaspar de Lemos discovered the bay of Guanabara in 1501, but it was the French who first settled permanently there. They, however, were driven out by the Portuguese in 1560.

At the beginning of the 18th century, a gold rush in Rio reawakened the interest of the French in their lost territory, and they attacked and raided the city. “oro”, Portuguese for gold, could allude to this gold rush, and “roi” to the fact that the entire Portuguese

⁴⁴ Cf. Max Bense, *Einführung in die informationstheoretische Ästhetik*, p. 129.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁴⁶ “Die visuelle Textgestaltung deutet iconisch das Bild des sich über der Bucht von Guanabara erhebenden tallosen Berges, des Corcovado, an, die Sonne (o) darüber, das Rauschen des Meeres (ronron) darunter.” *Ibid.*, p. 131.

monarchy and court settled in Rio in 1808. “orior” is Latin for “rise”, “become visible” or “appear”.⁴⁷ This seems to be almost a meta-semiotic comment: the words in this poem are given shape, a concrete gestalt which rises up in front of the recipient; meaning becomes iconically visible. “orion” is a stellar constellation, perhaps alluding to Gomringer’s notion of concrete poems as word constellations. Lastly, “rionoir”, “the black river”, is a palindrome, directing attention to the linguistic *Eigenwelt* of the poem once more, and “ri”, Portuguese for “he/she/it laughs”, could indicate the cheerful and festive occasion for which the poem was composed.

Bense’s poem “wenn es aber doch nicht ist”, from the collection “Die Zerstörung des Durstes durch Wasser”, written in 1967, is not concerned with spatial structures and visual realisation. But it thematises the material dimension of language in another way: it is a permutational poem. It represents a direct transfer of mathematical methods and concepts into poetry, as Bense envisaged in his aesthetic theories.⁴⁸ “wenn es aber doch nicht ist” methodologically investigates all possible combinations of the given six linguistic elements, which are 2^6 , that is 64 different arrangements in total.⁴⁹ Its main poetic principal is that of systematic formal constraint. Bense designates the poem as complete, because it covers all possible arrangements.⁵⁰ The elements of language here are treated like material in the full sense of the word, like any other quantities of elements, and they are systematically subjected to combinatorial procedure in five paragraphs, featuring respectively one, two, three, four and five elements per line. The final line, however, incorporating all six elements in their most meaningful sequence, “but if it is still not”, finally makes sense on the semantic level as well, and seems to sum up the agenda of the poem: it

⁴⁷ “orior” can also designate “to be born”, and “to be a consequence or result of something”.

⁴⁸ Permutational poetry is not a new phenomenon, and enjoyed its golden age already in the baroque period. Raimundus Lullus and Georg Phillip Harsdörfer with his “Denkring der teutschen Sprache” are probably the best known protagonists of the baroque *ars combinatoria*.

⁴⁹ The members of OuLiPo, or *l’Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* around François le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau, took the work with formal constraint as major poetic principle to new extremes, most notably in Queneau’s combinatorial sonnet “Cent mille milliards de poèmes” and in Georges Perec’s lipogrammatic novel *La Disparition*, which is written entirely without the letter “e”. Cf. Edward Lintz, “Difficiles Nuage: Gertrude Stein OULIPO and the Grammar of the Avant-Garde”. In: *European Avant-Garde. New Perspectives*, pp. 200-201.

⁵⁰ Cf. Max Bense, *Einführung in die informationstheoretische Ästhetik*, p. 88.

is a fragmented ontological reflection, thematising doubt, uncertainty, possibility and probability.

11.5 From Analytical Dissection to Artificial Generation: Entering the Digital Orbit

Bense and his students were the original pioneers of digital poetry: they were the very first to deploy computers for purely aesthetic purposes in order to produce stochastic, machine-generated poetry. In 1959, in the computer lab of the 'Technische Hochschule', Theo Lutz fed vocabulary taken from Franz Kafka's *Das Schloss* into a Zuse Z 22, and wrote a programme determining several rules of combination. Lutz describes his intentions as the desire to facilitate the generation of chance determined literature:

Unser Programm hatte die Aufgabe, das im allgemeinen recht mühsame Herstellen von stochastischen Texten zu übernehmen. Früher hatte man solche Texte bestimmt, indem man durch Würfeln oder einen sonstigen Zufallsprozeß Sätze oder Satzteile auswählte und diese aneinandersetzte.⁵¹

Lutz entered sixteen subjects and adjectives each, the verb "ist", conjunctions like "und" and "oder", and determiners such as "keine", "jeder" and "alle" into the memory of the machine. Each of these elements was equipped with an equal relative probability, an arithmetically determined chance-number.⁵² Only "ist" was programmed to appear regularly in every sentence. The programme then randomly created sequences of words. However, the elements of combination had been specified according to their word classes, so that the programme could differentiate between subjects, predicates, conjunctions, adjectives and even gender, and subsequently build grammatically correct elementary sentences. One of the first

⁵¹ Theo Lutz, "Stochastische Texte". At: <http://www.reinhard-doebl.de/poetscorner/lutz1.htm>.

⁵² Lutz describes this procedure as follows: "Ein solcher Zufallsgenerator funktioniert im Prinzip folgendermaßen: Aus einer Ausgangszahl wird durch eine arithmetische Operation eine neue Zahl gebildet und aus dieser Zahl durch Intersektion eine Anzahl Ziffern entnommen, die dann als Zufallszahl angesehen werden. Die bei dieser Operation entstandene Zahl ist Ausgangszahl für die Bestimmung der nächsten Zufallszahl. Durch Fortsetzung dieses Prozesses erhält man eine Folge von Zahlen. Den Zufallscharakter dieser Zahlen weist man empirisch nach, indem man sie in genügend großer Anzahl herstellt und auszählt. Für den zugrunde gelegten Zahlbereich, in dem sich die Zufallszahlen bewegen sollen, muß sich eine Gleichverteilung ergeben." Ibid.

sentences of the experiment read: "NICHT JEDER BLICK IST NAH UND KEIN DORF IST SPÄT." Further sentences included:

EINE KIRCHE IST STARK ODER NICHT JEDES DORF IST FERN.
JEDER FREMDE IST NAH, SO GILT KEIN FREMDER IST ALT.
EIN HAUS IST OFFEN. KEIN WEG IST OFFEN.
EIN TURM IST WUETEND. JEDER TISCH IST FREI.
EIN FREMDER IST LEISE UND NICHT JEDES SCHLOSS IST FREI.
EIN TISCH IST STARK UND EIN KNECHT IST STILL.
NICHT JEDES AUGE IST ALT. JEDER TAG IST GROSS.⁵³

The syntactic compatibility contrasts starkly with the semantic incompatibility: "tower" and "anger" and "table" and "freedom" are concepts that exclude each other mutually. The text grossly violates pragmatic selection restrictions. However, it is precisely this incompatibility, the surprise moment and the unusual imagery that are conjured up, which constitute the text's poetic appeal, and once more illustrates Bense's notion of aesthetic information as "*unwahrscheinliche, stark selektierte, nichttriviale Wortfolgen*".⁵⁴

The step from the purely formal and material description of aesthetic states to the automatic generation of aesthetic texts seems to be the logical corollary of Bense's theoretical framework: once the description of aesthetic texts is accurate and complete, it can be turned into a set of rules for their production; mechanical analysis can be converted into mechanical production:

Da ästhetische Verteilungen Häufigkeitsverteilungen sind, ist also mit dem Zufallsgenerator schon die Möglichkeit gegeben, die stochastischen Texte ästhetisch zu erzeugen.⁵⁵

Bense considers the experiments with computer poetry both as the consequence and as the effectuation of his aesthetic ideas. He argues that the semiotic, stochastic and numerical procedures for the analysis of texts were not meant to merely be tools for a description of material structures, but should also be applicable as generative models for the production of methodological, automatic and artificial texts. Here, a parallel

⁵³ Ibid. These first instances of computer-generated poetry were published in the *augenblick* in 1959.

⁵⁴ Max Bense, *Einführung in die informationstheoretische Ästhetik*, p.110.

⁵⁵ Max Bense, "Bestandteile des Vorüber. Dünnschliffe Mischtexte Montagen". In: Max Bense, *Ausgewählte Schriften. Band 4, Poetische Texte*, vol. 4. Edited by Elisabeth Walther. Stuttgart; Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1998, p. 64.

to generative grammars becomes obvious: exact schematic descriptions of grammars allowed for an automatic generation of correct sentences, and in the case of computer generated poetry too, the methods of dissection and analysis of textual structures could be converted into methods of synthetic generation. Bense thus defines “generative aesthetics” as “Inbegriff aller Operationen, Regeln und Theoreme”, which can be applied to all repertoires of materially manipulable elements.⁵⁶

Die analytische Beschreibung von Texten mit mathematischen Mitteln statistischer und topologischer Art legte von Anfang an den Gedanken nahe, die exakten Verfahren der Zerlegung in technische Verfahren eines synthetischen Aufbaus der Texte umzukehren. Verstärkt wurde der Gedanke, als es möglich wurde, datenverarbeitende Rechenanlagen mit ihrer Fähigkeit zur programmierbaren Speicherung, Selektierung, Sortierung, Repetierung und Verknüpfung von eingegebenen Daten heranzuziehen. [...] Damit drang die Idee einer *künstlichen* Poesie in die experimentelle Literatur der Avantgarde ein, die zugleich als *synthetische* oder sogar als *technologische* Poesie definiert werden konnte.⁵⁷

Theory and technology, and the new possibilities they opened up for poetic experiments, are the decisive triggers: while Bense’s concepts and general ideas emerged from the occupation with, and incorporation of, new theories into his own aesthetic frameworks, and were also inspired by technological developments which sharpened perceptive faculties and created awareness for micro-aesthetic structures, their ultimate effectuation became feasible only with the advanced possibilities of storing, selecting, grouping and combining data opened up by computer technology. Essentially, the artificial generation of aesthetic texts can be considered as the ultimate attempt to eliminate the subjective and to convey aesthetics detached from semantic meaning, to shift the aesthetic interest entirely into the purely material realm: “sie zeigen, wie viel die Materialien und wie wenig die Bedeutungen vermögen [...]”.⁵⁸ He explains:

Sie sind also weniger auf Sinn als auf eine gewisse Art von Anreiz aus, der im bloßen Material der Sprache entspringen und verwirklicht werden soll. Es gehört also zur Technik dieser Dünnschliffe, eine *linguistische Prosa* zu

⁵⁶ Max Bense, *Einführung in die informationstheoretische Ästhetik*, p. 62.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 109.

⁵⁸ Max Bense, “Bestandteile des Vorüber. Dünnschliffe Mischtexte Montagen”, p. 64.

versuchen, deren Aufgabe es sein könnte, eine vom sprachlichen Sinn losgelöste Schönheit zu vermitteln.⁵⁹

“Material anstelle von Bedeutung”, Bense proclaims in “Manifest einer neuen Prosa und Poesie”, the first computer poetry manifesto, written in 1960.⁶⁰ “An der Spitze der Feder and Worte, nicht an Gegenstände denken”, he writes, and states programmatically: “Die Strategie des Sprachspiels digitaler Texte beabsichtigt, der Außenwelt semantische Verluste beizubringen, um ästhetische Gewinne zu erzielen. [...]”⁶¹ Textual meaning is the result of a machine-determined random process rather than a pre-meditated intentional creation: “Das Wort abhängig von einer Entscheidung, nicht von einer Außenwelt.”⁶²

The random function of computers seems indeed to be the perfect tool for the effectuation of Bense’s concept of aesthetic information as unexpected, unusual and surprising information. Moreover, the preoccupation with chance products and aleatorically generated texts, which had already been explored by the Dadaists, is now lifted to a technologically enhanced level, and thereby improved, Bense claims, since the random function of machines is a much better instrument for implementing chance than the human consciousness: “[...] offenbar besitzt die Rechanlage einen besseren *Zufallsgenerator* als das Bewußtsein.”⁶³

The automatic generation of literature has drastic implications for the status of the author: not only is the notion of intentional creative producer of a work of art radically challenged, but the work of art is no longer in an immediate relation to the creator. It is mediated through various stages of technological processes. The author of a computer-generated text is now, rather than being the original and direct creator, somebody who chooses a source, who selects the elements of a text and defines and establishes the parameters and rules for their fusion. The actual combination of these is determined by a machine. While the poets of the historical avant-garde perceived of themselves as arrangers, as engineers, fitters and mechanics, the technologically enhanced and updated version of this notion is the programmer.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 63.

⁶⁰ Max Bense, “Manifest einer neuen Prosa und Poesie”. *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 30 June 1960.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Max Bense, “Bestandteile des Vorüber. Dünnschliffe Mischtexte Montagen”, p. 64.

Perhaps the most important aspect of combinatorial and chance-determined works, as Adorno has pointed out, is the surprise moment: the results of chance productions are unpredictable, they display features which astound even the artists themselves. Chance is effectively deployed as a tool to transgress the subjective powers of imagination, to go beyond the producer's limits of comprehension in an attempt to arrive at results which transcend both cultural, psychological and intellectual boundaries.⁶⁴

Many concerns both of the poets of the historical avant-garde and the concrete poets converge in Bense's framework, and are carried to their most radical extremes. The obsession with the autonomous linguistic material and the neglect of the semantic dimension, the fascination with technology, the preoccupation with objectivity, method and chance are all driven to their most drastic consequences. The result is a mechanical, purely rational approach, the ultimate objectification of language and the complete elimination of the subjective.

⁶⁴ Adorno writes: "Bezeichnete [der Begriff des Experiments] noch um 1930 den durchs kritische Bewußtsein gefilterten Versuch, im Gegensatz zum unreflektierten Weitermachen, so ist unterdessen hinzugetreten, daß die Gebilde Züge enthalten sollen, die im Produktionsprozeß nicht absehbar sind; daß, subjektiv, der Künstler von seinen Gebilden überrascht werde. Darin wird Kunst eines stets vorhandenen, von Mallarmé hervorgehobenen Moments sich bewußt. Kaum je hat die Imagination der Künstler vollkommen in sich einbegriffen, was sie hervorbrachten. Die kombinatorischen Künste etwa der ars nova und dann der Niederländer infiltrierten die spätmittelalterliche Musik mit Ergebnissen, welche die subjektive Vorstellung der Komponisten überschritten haben dürfte." Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 63.

12. OUTLOOK: THE RE-BIRTH OF AVANT-GARDE POETICS IN BINARY CODE. A VIEW INTO THE DIGITAL FUTURE

12.1 Stage Three?

A rumour pervades current discourse: it is pronounced that the avant-garde has re-emerged once more. This time, the rebirth is technologically enhanced and transpires in binary code, in the realm of the digital. Block for instance identifies a “new avant-garde consciousness” in digital literature discourse. He observes a renaissance of the radical gestures and messianic propositions of historical avant-garde manifestos, particularly in reference to the resurrection of the concept of newness and the proclamation of a radical break with all that has ever been done before:¹

A “new” avant-garde consciousness, igniting with current technical achievements and with the connected artistic experiments, is undeniable in the digital poetry discussion: along with the new media, newness according to modern progress and as a value of economic exchange returns with a vengeance.²

Thomas Wohlfahrt too maintains “that the individual threads of the poetic avant-garde have been taken up once again to be rewoven in new and progressive ways precisely where they had seemed to end.”³ And indeed: techniques, strategies and concepts of the avant-garde seem to be re-emerging technologically enhanced in digital space, and digital poets and critics promote their works or objects of discussion as something groundbreakingly new and as the ultimate advancement of current literature – in short, as avant-garde.

¹ Friedrich W. Block, “Digital poetics or On the evolution of experimental media poetry”. In “Innovation oder Trivialität?” Block elaborates further: “Um den empirischen Befund kommen wir nicht herum: Es gibt offenbar wieder ein Avantgarde-Bewußtsein im Einzugsbereich digitaler Ästhetik, ein Avantgarde-Bewußtsein, das in Stil, Gestus und auch Aussage nicht selten an historische Manifeste erinnert, etwa an das ‘futuristische Manifest zur mechanischen Kunst’ aus dem Jahre 1922.” Friedrich W. Block, “Innovation oder Trivialität? Zur hypermedialen ‘Übersetzung’ der Moderne am Beispiel des Elektronischen Lexikon-Romans”. At: <http://www.netzliteratur.net/block/innovation.html>.

² Friedrich W. Block, “Digital poetics or On the evolution of experimental media poetry”.

³ Thomas Wohlfahrt, “Vorwort”. In: Friedrich W. Block, Christiane Heibach, Karin Wenz (eds.), *Poesis. Ästhetik digitaler Poesie/The Aesthetics of Digital Poetry*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2004, p. 9.

Ever since computers were accessible to poets and especially since the World Wide Web was launched in 1991, artists have appropriated the new medium for creative purposes.⁴ Expectations were high: hypertext fiction for instance was celebrated as the ultimate alternative to print literature, for it privileged transience and openness rather than fixity, multilinearity rather than linearity, active reception strategies and offers of choices and diverging reading paths rather than hierarchical structures. The death of book culture was proclaimed, and, once more, the death of the author. The hype about hypertext, however, has ebbed away, and, along with increasingly advanced software, new types of digital literature have emerged, which exploit and explore other media-specific characteristics of the computer.

12.2 Correspondences between Digital, Avant-Garde and Concrete Poetry

The analogies between digital poetry of today, historical avant-garde and concrete poetry are numerous and conspicuous: digital literature not only emerged in the orbit of concrete poetry, but is frequently discussed in relation to concepts and techniques developed by historical avant-garde and concrete poets.⁵ As pointed out in the previous chapters, the move into the digital realm seems to be a logical next step in the avant-garde quest: the Italian Futurists already envisaged poetry in motion, animated letter dramas, and Augusto declared that the “wishful thinking” of the 50s came about with the creative exploration of possibilities opened up by computer technology, which, Augusto argues, represent the “ideal space for ‘verbivocovisual’ adventures.”⁶ Bense, moreover, considered digital literature as both the corollary and the effectuation of his aesthetic theories.⁷

⁴ An ur-version of the web was launched in 1969 in the USA as APRANET, and was originally conceived for military and research purposes. The American Department of Defence withdrew itself from the net management in 1987, and the Internet became subsequently increasingly popular. The World Wide Web was released by CERN, the European Particle Physics Institute in Geneva, in 1991. Cf. Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics. The Making of E-Poetries*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2002.

⁵ Many critics emphasise the indebtedness of digital literature to the avant-gardes, especially Friedrich W. Block at: www.netzliteratur.de/block, and Christiane Heibach in “Vorläufer der Literatur im elektronischen Raum: Kleine Geschichte künstlerische Konzepte”. In: Christiane Heibach, *Literatur im elektronischen Raum*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004, pp. 68 – 143. Cf. also Loss Pequeño Glaziers, Robert Kendall, Peter Gendolla and Jörgen Schäfer.

⁶ Augusto de Campos, “The Yale Symposium on contemporary poetics and concretism: a world view from the 1990s”, p. 388.

⁷ Other protagonists of the concrete poetry movement contributed to the development of digital literature too: Emmett Williams for instance started to deploy computers for the generation of poetry

Not only the practical beginnings of digital literature, but also the conceptual ones have their roots in the historical and the neo-avant-garde: the most relevant correspondence is to be found in the dedication to the exploration of the material and the media-specific qualities.⁸ The creative investigation of the properties of the medium, the exploration of the visual, acoustic and material dimension of language is one of the major and most dominant characteristics of avant-garde experimentation. In digital poetry too the properties of the given poetic material are explored. However, as Block has rightly pointed out, the specific material of digital poetry is no longer just language, but in fact language in the computer, language equipped with new performative capacities generated and structured by code.⁹ The new medium brings with it a whole cluster of new material issues, most importantly the potential of different levels of code ranging from binary code via ASCII to complex programming languages. And from this new material basis, from software and hardware packages and the code-based nature of computer processes, a new textuality emerges and aesthetic specificities arise. They are frequently referred to as interactivity, intermediality, connectivity, processuality and dynamism.¹⁰

Again, the conceptual histories of these terms can all be traced back to the avant-garde. Interactivity for instance, as Block points out, was a fundamental prerequisite of avant-garde poetry, where passive consumption was prevented and recipients were frequently forced into actively partaking in the production of meaning.¹¹ The offer of different possible combinations of the textual building blocks, as in hypertext, is also an aspect of the activation of the recipient, and this concept too has its roots in the

in 1966, and so did Augusto some years later. Augusto furnished a selection of his concrete poems with a performative dimension, sound and animation on his web-page. At: <http://www2.uol.com.br/augustodecampos/poemas.htm>.

⁸ Cf. Block, who writes that digital literature "should exemplify its specific digital or hypermedia structures and processes, its specific type of media. This means it creates events and situations to observe language-usage within the hypermedia." Friedrich W. Block, "Digital poetics or On the evolution of experimental media poetry".

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁰ Block, Heibach and Wenz name "medial self-reference, processuality, interactivity, hypermediality, and networking" as key terms. Friedrich W. Block, Christiane Heibach, Karin Wenz, "The Aesthetics of Digital Poetry: An Introduction". In: *p0es1s*, p. 25.

¹¹ Block writes: "Mit Interaktivität ist also zunächst einmal Aktivierung des Rezipienten gemeint. Das hat natürlich Tradition. Die Avantgarden der Moderne haben immer wieder einen Leser visioniert, der nicht konsumiert, sondern bewußt in den ästhetischen Prozeß eingreift. Der 'neue Leser' wird bekanntlich auch im konkretistischen Programm visueller Poesie beschworen." Friedrich W. Block, "Auf hoher Seh in der Turing-Galaxis. Visuelle Poesie und Hypermedia". At: http://www.netzliteratur.net/block/block_turing.html.

avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s.¹² Raymond Queneau for instance explored combination theory in “Cent mille milliards de poèmes”, written in 1961.¹³ Marc Saporta’s *Composition No. 1* from 1962, a novel which comes on 150 unnumbered cards, which the reader is asked to shuffle and read in any random succession, can be considered as another proto-hypertext, as is Julio Cortázar’s novel *Hopscotch* from 1966, for it too offers the reader alternative paths through the text. Concrete poetry belongs in this lineage of conceptual hypertext ancestors as well, for most concrete poems also offer the reader multiple different reading paths through the textual material, like Gomringer’s “wind”.

The concern with intermediality, the programmatic crossing and blurring of genre borders and the fusion of different sign systems, is another issue which is of significance both in the historical, the neo-avant-garde and digital poetry. Crossing genres and violating habits of perception was indeed an objective of many avant-gardists, initiated by the insertion of letters into pictures by the Cubists and ranging to the emphasis upon space and visual codes in concrete poetry, where meaning is frequently shown rather than spelled out. The Italian Futurists’ already called for the “heedless mixing of all the arts already in existence”.¹⁴ Many avant-garde poems border at the fine art threshold, for the visual dimension is deemed more virulent than the semantic one, in a conscious effort to undermine the dominant function of the linguistic sign system.

The boundaries between music, art and literature, however, have never been as thoroughly blurred as in the realms of digital poetry: sound, still and moving images and text can all coexist on a single page. In “Untitled” by Squid Soup for example, a three-dimensional orange space defined by walls made of letters, through which the user navigates accompanied by a jazzy sound track and a murmur of space-age

¹² Bolter claimed that hypertext is nothing but a text cut up into little segments: “A hypertext is like a printed book that the author has attacked with a pair of scissors and cut into convenient verbal sizes.” Jay David Bolter, “Topographic Writing: Hypertext and the Electronic Writing Space”. In: Paul Delany and George P. Landow (eds), *Hypermedia and Literary Studies*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 1991, p. 111. Literally cutting up a text is something which William Burroughs explored in 1959 in his “cut-up poetry”, which can in turn be traced to Tristan Tzara’s “Pour faire un poème dadaïste”.

¹³ This poetry book consist of 10 sonnets, of which each of the 14 lines is cut free individually so that the recipient can combine all lines from all sonnets with each other, which results in 10 to the power of 14 different possibilities.

¹⁴ Bruno Corradini and Emilio Settimelli, “Weights, measures and Prices of Artistic Genius – Futurist Manifesto 1914”. In: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 146.

voices, single letters can be clicked to generate images and sounds which float into the constellation.¹⁵ It is one of the numerous examples which literally “fall between the media”, and the simultaneous presence of sounds, letters and shapes, which are represented both aurally and typographically, immerse the user completely in the tension between the different sign systems.

Heibach points out that the change of the dominant function of certain codes or sign systems is of foremost importance in digital poetry: word and image are often functionally fused and text takes over the tasks of images.¹⁶ Thus the reading process is subverted, and strategies of reception are violated, just as in cubist paintings and dadaist photomontage, where text fragments forced readers to oscillate continually between reading and looking. An excellent example for this change of the conventional function of signs are Ana Maria Uribe’s “Anipoems”, in which letters fulfil the tasks of images: the phenotypes of letters, their shapes and forms and the visual associations they trigger, are the crucial constituents of meaning here.¹⁷ The dominant function of letters, to be building blocks of words and thus particles carrying semantic meaning, is undermined: they are deployed for their visual dimension only. The letters perform, and act, and stretch and twitch and flicker. They mimic the shape of animals; a “P” exercises and stretches its leg and thus transforms into an “R”; an “i” has a headache which makes its dot rotate furiously. Uribe’s letters are animated linguistic signs which do something: programme code is used to inscribe behaviour into the textual system, which is thus transformed from static to performative and kinetic.

Another issue that gains momentum in the net is that of self-publishing. Virtually all avant-garde and concrete poets initially published themselves and each other, at their own costs and with their own means. All of them created their own outlets and networks, ranging from journals, flyers, magazines, leaflets and self-owned printing presses to anthologies and exhibitions. As Loss Pequeño Glazier has pointed out, the opportunity of independent dissemination was indeed an important engine for numerous historical writing movements:¹⁸ “Poets had taken over the means of poetry

¹⁵ Squid Soup, “Untitled”. At: <http://www.theremediproject.com/projects/issue7/squidsoupuntitled/>.

¹⁶ Cf. Christiane Heibach, *Literatur im elektronischen Raum*, p. 97.

¹⁷ Ana Maria Uribe, “Anipoems”. At: <http://www.vispo.com/uribe/anipoems.html>.

¹⁸ Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics*, p. 29.

production.”¹⁹ Circumventing the institutionalised channels of production and dissemination, operating autonomously from mainstream demands and relatively independently from commercial considerations and vested or political interests, are undeniably prerequisites for avant-garde activities. As for the Internet, self-publication is an inherent quality of the medium, and things posted on the web are instantaneously in circulation and ubiquitous in reach; there are no material, temporal, spatial, ideological or major financial impediments.

Once more, here too it is the emergence of new technologies which proves to be the agent of artistic change, the trigger for the invention of new art forms. Berghaus has pointed out that the shift from industrial to post-industrial information society, the transition from commodity to service economy, had drastic social consequences. Just as new means of transportation and communication changed life at the beginning of the 20th century and played a vital part in stimulating the revolution in the arts, the emergence of information technology caused fundamental changes in economic, social and cultural domains as well.²⁰ Not surprisingly, artists did not remain ignorant of these changes, and very explicitly responded to them by directly annexing and dissecting the technologies responsible for these transformations.

12.3 Putting Avant-Garde Poetics into Effect?

The notion that standing definitions of digital poetry converge with strategies explored in the avant-gardes is certainly substantial. The question is, however, whether digital poetry adds anything substantially new: does poetry in the computer do things that poetry on the page was not able to do? Is the stylistic repertoire enlarged, is the catalogue of means and methods expanded, or are avant-garde techniques just “transmediated”, transferred from one medium to the other?

The new medium, both digital poets and critics maintain, presents poetry with new options of organising and manipulating the signifying material, and thus substantially

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

²⁰ Berghaus writes: “In the late twentieth century, information technology became an integral element of people’s domestic life. Satellite or cable TV, video recorders, computer games, credit and switch cards, mobile phones, fax and email radically challenged life in urban societies.” Günter Berghaus, *Avant-Garde Performance. Live Events and Electronic Technologies*, p. 52.

enlarges the stylistic repertoire of poetry.²¹ Most significantly, they argue, some cognitive concepts which were vital for the avant-gardes can now be literally effectuated, they can be performed, realised, put into action. Above all, movement and dynamism spring to mind. Block draws yet another parallel to forerunners here, and mentions Mon's collection *movens* as well as Eco's concept of the open work as an example for the concern with movement within the programme of experimental art and literature.²² Moreover, both Mon and Azeredo also tried to evoke movement iconically in "sinks" and "velocidade", as did the Italian Futurists before them. Letters in digital poetry in contrast are literally unfastened: they can be animated, they move, they float, they change, they are met on scene and perform, they dance and switch and flicker. Texts become kinetic and dynamic in a literal sense.²³ Marie-Laure Ryan points out that the digital revolution

has let words on the loose, not just by liberating their semantic potential, as most avant-garde movements of the past hundred years have done, but in a physical, quite literal sense as well.²⁴

While the Futurists freed words from the confinements of syntax, digital poets freed them from their static predicament. Real, actual movement, the dynamisation of text, is indeed the key novelty in digital poetry. Miekal And's work "after emmett. a voyage in ninetiles" from 1998, which is a homage to Emmett Williams and a reflection upon the ancestry of the concrete poets and the position of digital poets in

²¹ Block, Heibach and Wenz maintain that "digital poetry expands and renews the program of experimental forms of writing." Friedrich W. Block, Christiane Heibach, Karin Wenz, "The Aesthetics of Digital Poetry: An Introduction", p. 21.

Glazier proposes too that digital poetry "extend[s] the investigations of innovative practice as it occurred in print media, making possible the continuation of lines of inquiry that could not be fulfilled in that medium." Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics*, p. 26.

And Heibach even argues that the computer itself generates new modes of representation, and that through the "transmedialisation" of concepts, these concepts are altered in substance automatically: "Die Funktion von Zeichensystemen wird [...] durch ihre 'technischen' Trägermedien entscheidend beeinflusst." It is obvious, Heibach writes, "dass die medialen Potenziale des Computers neue Darstellungsformen erzeugen, die [...] grundlegende Veränderung unseres Wahrnehmungs- und Handlungsverhaltens erfordern." Christiane Heibach, "Ins Universum der digitalen Literatur. Versuch einer Typologie". In: *Digitale Literatur. TEXT UND KRITIK. Zeitschrift für Literatur*, vol. 152, 2001, p. 35.

²² Cf. Friedrich W. Block, "Digital poetics or On the evolution of experimental media poetry".

²³ Cf. Glazier, who states: "Innovative print works find a very natural extension into the digital medium where the kinetic and nonlinear qualities of text can be made literal." Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics*, p. 27.

²⁴ Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 28.

this lineage, illustrates this issue poignantly.²⁵ It evokes William's poem "The Voy Age" from 1975 which consists of 100 word squares decreasing in size as the poem advances, until only a minuscule residue remains. And's digital poem displays fifty-three consecutive screens featuring a three-by-three grid of nine letters or punctuation marks each. Each single character in those word squares changes typeface continually, switching through a sequence of five to eight different fonts. As a result, the letters seem to dance: they swell and shrink, shimmer and flicker, bloat and shrivel, twitch and shake. They seem to move, to pulsate, palpitate, and a sense of motion and dynamics is evoked. "Eyevoyage", the first trio of syllables, emphasises that this piece is appealing to the sense of vision. Here, the concern of concrete poetry with visual gestalt, structural space, typography, geometrical word patterns and movement is transferred into another medium and enriched by a new feature: actual movement, characters in flux, changing size and typeface – dynamic signs in constant metamorphosis.

The issue of time too rises to prominence in some digital works, since by means of animation, the programmed behaviour of text, image and sound, letters perform a predetermined act within a fixed temporal framework. Temporal structures, in the case of non-interactive animations, are thus rigidly and firmly imposed upon the viewer. The temporality and speed of such flash-animated poems is comparable to film – it is authoritative and unyielding, whereas a print poem can be explored in the time span and pace the recipient chooses. The pace at which the words flash up and succeed each other in Young-Hae Chang's Cantos-inspired "Dakota" from 2001 for instance dictates the rhythm of the story: it is a decidedly non-interactive piece, a moving text synchronised to jazz, in which the words speed up and slow down and assault the viewer in too fast a succession which is hardly readable, and then they pause and drag.²⁶ Rigidly programmed pace is a constituent technique of this work; the flow of the narrative is dictatorially imposed, and the idea of rhythm is thus materialised. Through programming, text is now able to perform. Programme codes can be used to inscribe a certain behaviour into a textual system. Operative, efficacious programme codes, as John Cayley points out, "instantiate a genuinely

²⁵ Miekal And, "after emmett. a voyage in ninetiles". At: <http://www.cla.umn.edu/joglars/afteremmett/voyage.html>.

²⁶ Young-Hae Chang, "Dakota". At: <http://www.yhchang.com/DAKOTA.html>.

‘performative’ textuality, a textuality which ‘does’ something, which alters the behaviour of a system.”²⁷

Interactivity too is transformed from a cognitive concept into a concrete action. While all avant-garde and concrete works force the recipient into mental activity, the user now has the possibility to actively and physically intervene into content and structure of some works by means of choosing, clicking, scrolling and dragging. Moreover, as Simon Biggs points out, the actions of the recipient may result in visible effects upon the work:

The term interactivity can be used to refer to those works that feature some form of responsiveness to the reader, where that responsiveness causes the content of the work to be altered.²⁸

“The interactive element is something entirely new that the computer brings to written literature,” Robert Kendall maintains.²⁹ In Jim Andrews’ “Arteroids” from 2002 for example, the boundaries between poem and game are collapsed: the user can navigate a word over the screen, and has to shoot fragmented poetic sequences which float randomly into the field of vision, descending upon the user’s identity like asteroids, and which, when hit, explode in circular sprays of atomised letter material underlined by a distorted soundtrack.³⁰ The text that glides into the screen can be edited and changed, its speed and colour can be altered and it can be shot and destroyed or allowed to keep on hovering. “Arteroids is about cracking language open,” Andrews writes, and thus places himself firmly into the tradition of the avant-gardes, who have always worked under the aegis of venturing forth into the very heart of language by means of taking it apart.³¹

²⁷ John Cayley, “The Code is Not the Text (unless it is the Text)”. In: *p0es1s*, p. 293.

²⁸ Simon Biggs, “On Navigation and Interactivity”. In: *p0es1s*, p. 187.

²⁹ Kendall writes: “Exploiting the PC’s facility with animation, the SoftPoem presents its text in a graphical choreography that coordinates meaning and movement. The words themselves, as they move and change on screen, become like actors in a theater piece. This gives the SoftPoem much of the dynamism of spoken or sung poetry--a dynamism missing from the printed page. Yet the poem ‘performed’ by the PC sacrifices none of the subtleties of spelling, punctuation, or layout that come through only in the written word, since the written word is still right there on the screen.” Robert Kendall, “The Electronic Word. Techniques and Possibilities for Interactive Multimedia Literature”. At: <http://wordcircuits.com/kendall/essays/elecword.htm>.

³⁰ Jim Andrews, “Arteroids”. At: <http://www.vispo.com/arteroids/indexenglish.htm>.

³¹ Jim Andrews, “The Battle of Poetry against itself and the forces of dullness”. At: <http://www.vispo.com/arteroids/indexenglish.htm>.

Multilinearity too can be effectuated on a new level: on the one hand, in hypertext, one can literally jump from one text segment to the next, completely regardless of any hierarchical structures. On the other hand, words can now float across the screen from all directions, and the concept of line is thus ultimately undermined.

Intermediality, the violation of genre borders and the fusion of divergent sign systems, can be put into effect like it never could before: while in avant-garde poetry hybrid structures between word, image and music were explored, the simultaneous employment of all senses at once remained utopian. Now, the visual, the acoustic and the semantic dimension can all be investigated at once: letters can float through digital space accompanied by a sound track. Words can be heard and seen at the same time. In Takaumi Furuhashi's "Kotoba Asobi" for instance, which means "Japanese wordplays", the "verbivocovisual" aspects of language constitute a conceptual triad and engage the user with all senses.³² In Furuhashi's shockwave application the words of a sentence or proverb float randomly over the black screen, in different colours, sometimes alone, sometimes all at once, sometimes overlapping, sometimes fast and sometimes slow, from different directions. To a certain degree, the user can determine the speed and direction of the verbal material with the help of the mouse. Two balls drift across the screen as well. Whenever a word and a ball collide, the word changes size and colour and is audibly distorted from either a male or a female voice. The balls are out of the sphere of influence of the recipient; however, it is to some degree possible to influence which words are to hit the balls.

Apart from the concern with machine-determined randomness that echoes chance-procedures for the generation of poetry employed by the Dadaists, other parallels to the predecessors become evident. The words of eight different sentences, rather trivial in content and without much poetic potential, migrate over the screen independently from their position in the hierarchy of the sentence. The effect of this is to render the relation between the component parts fluid, language is dissected at the level of grammar: through a change of position, a semantic change occurs, syntax becomes unstable and the words pair and combine in different constellations. The instability of meaning is dramatised: meaning, it becomes clear, depends on the position of the parts. If these are on the loose and float through space, meaning as

³² Takaumi Furuhashi, "Kotoba Asobi". At: http://www.p0es1s.net/p0es1s/bio_e/furu.htm.

well is rendered indeterminable. Words migrate through space and are no longer tied down to linguistic hierarchies. Space here is used dynamically, multilinearity is put into effect. It takes the user a while to figure out the proper constellation of words – which is determined through gender, case and number of the subjects, adjectives, prepositions and adverbs. The proverb of screen 6, “Zwei Fliegen mit einer Klappe schlagen”, to resolve two things with one effort, seems programmatic: here, the visual and acoustic dimensions of words coexist simultaneously.

Kendall maintains that digital poetry is thus able to combine the advantages of both written and spoken language: dynamism and details which can only be expressed acoustically as well as levels of meaning conveyed through the subtleties of spelling, punctuation and layout, can co-exist for the first time.³³ What is more, digital poetry for Kendall, just like concrete poetry for Gomringer, presents a way to delve into communication strategies unique to the information age: it allows for the exploration of “modes of writing that capture the essence of our techno-centric society in a way that poetry on the page could never hope to do.”³⁴ Gomringer too considered concrete poetry a means for encapsulating the technologically influenced abbreviated language of the times.

12.4 Digital Dissections

The observation that the self-reflective exploration of the material, as well as concerns with intermediality, movement and dynamism, spatial structures and interactivity, are recuperated and technologically enhanced in digital poetry seems valid. It could be said, however, that many of these concerns centre on the technological actualities of the medium, and present natural functions of the computer rather than deliberate artistic strategies. Indeed, the question arises whether it is not the computer medium itself which is “avant-garde”, whether it is not the technology alone which is progressive and new, an issue that Lev Manovich raises in “Avant-garde as Software”.³⁵ Manovich argues that strategies of the avant-garde, especially the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s, re-emerge as basic conventions of

³³ Robert Kendall, “SoftPoems. About this medium”. At: <http://wordcircuits.com/kendall/poetry/softpoet.htm>

³⁴ Robert Kendall, “The Electronic Word. Techniques and Possibilities for Interactive Multimedia Literature”.

³⁵ Lev Manovich, “Avant-garde as Software”. At: <http://www.manovich.net/>.

modern human computer interfaces and are transformed into standard computer technology.

Collage for instance resurfaces as the cut and paste command. Dynamic windows, pull-down menus and HTML tables “all allow a computer user to simultaneously work with practically unrestricted amount[s] of information”, and can therefore be considered as effectuation of the avant-garde’s vision of capturing simultaneity.³⁶

What Manovich calls “atomistic approach”, namely “the idea that a complex visual message can be constructed from simple elements whose psychological effects are known beforehand”, as for instance in abstract and constructivist paintings, also returns with new force: it is transformed from a theory of visual meaning into a technological prerequisite, for the digital image itself, Manovich argues, consists of atom-like pixels. Ready-mades too are frequently used in digital media, for “ready-made elements such as icons, textures, video clips, [...] chunks of Javascript code [...] etc.” are the natural building blocks of all new media works.³⁷ Jan Tschischold’s “New Typography” principles, namely clearly structured typographical hierarchies, are, according to Manovich, the very basis of all graphic Windows interfaces. “In short,” Manovich concludes, “the avant-garde becomes software.”³⁸

Manovich’s train of thought can be taken even further: features such as intermediality too are in fact basic technical qualities of the medium, since “the electronic page crosses media by definition.”³⁹ Transience and variability are also natural facets of all digital information, and activity on the side of the recipient is the most fundamental prerequisite of any command-based software.

It seems as if artistic strategies and concepts of the avant-gardes have been transformed into basic functions of digital technology: modern software technology has appropriated, naturalised and thus neutralised key issues of the avant-gardes by integrating them into mainstream practice. However, this phenomenon could be seen from the reverse angle as well: the poets of the avant-gardes have actually anticipated and advanced many concepts artistically which became technological

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics*, p. 79.

standard operations only decades later. Benjamin's assertion is thus reinforced with vigour here once more. He writes:

Es ist von jeher eine der wichtigsten Aufgaben der Kunst gewesen, eine Nachfrage zu erzeugen, für deren volle Befriedigung die Stunde noch nicht gekommen ist. Die Geschichte jeder Kunstform hat kritische Zeiten, in denen diese Form auf Effekte hindrängt, die sich zwanglos erst bei einem veränderten technischen Standard, d.h. in einer neuen Kunstform ergeben können.⁴⁰

However, since once revolutionary effects and techniques have now become technological standards, a further twist is required: something has to be done with or to that technology so that it can genuinely qualify as avant-garde again. The technology itself and the conventions governing its usage have to be thematised; they have to become the new centre of poetic attention: smooth, seamless reception processes need to be interrupted, disturbances must be created, pragmatic strategies must be frustrated and links and commands de-functionalised in an attempt to redirect attention to the basic features and conventions of the medium, and to question automatised strategies of perception and behaviour.

As pointed out in the previous chapters, language in avant-garde and concrete poetry has been dissected, cut open and taken apart for various different reasons. One motive, however, united all of the poets: the intention of *Bewußtseinsbildung*, the attempt to create an awareness of codes, functions and patterns that govern language usage and communication in general. Ultimately, they used semiotic disturbances as a tool for throwing the reader back upon his or her own self, forcing him or her into a state of self-reflexion which would ideally lead to the transgression of cognitive boundaries and social preconceptions. They burst open language in order to burst open and transform the psychological, cognitive, linguistic and ideological boundaries of the recipient. Dissection in historical avant-garde and concrete poetry was a cultural tool, a device for re-education on the level of signs and a transformation of value structures.

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit", pp. 500-501.

In the most interesting and relevant works of digital poetry, the rug of certainty is similarly pulled from underneath the recipient's feet. Here too the veil of familiarity is torn, complacent consumption is prevented, and critical reflection upon the recipient's assumptions and limitations as well as on the conventions and specificities of the new medium are encouraged.⁴¹ Habitual forms of usage are interrupted and subverted, customary responses are frustrated.

Many self-reflexive digital works thematise the difference between browser interpretation and source code: some web poets not only use fabric and functions of the browser to create and show their work, but often, the browser itself becomes the very subject matter. The aptly named "Shredder" by Mark Napier from 1998 for example, in a truly cannibalistic fashion, ingests, appropriates and alters data and source codes of certain web pages before the browser reads them, and spits them out as a chaotic collage of random fragments.⁴² The "Discoder" from Exonemo from 1999 allows the user to invade the source code of any chosen web-site and thus to change, manipulate and interfere into the visible surface and the given order of signs.⁴³ Napier's "Riot" from 2001 also thematises browser functions and conventions, as well as notions of property and boundary in the web.⁴⁴ "[...] Riot disrupts the accepted rules of property and exposes the fragility of territorial boundaries", Napier writes.⁴⁵ "Riot" builds its page by combining fragmented texts, images and links from the pages that any Riot user has surfed before, resulting in a jumble of images, brand names and corporate logos. It is a software-coded "melting pot", "a blender that mixes web pages from separate domains into one browser window."⁴⁶ Napier states:

Content and ideologies clash and merge as Riot draws from disparate URLs to create a web of mutable, shifting borders. Riot dissolves traditional notions of territory, ownership, and authority by collapsing territorial conventions like domains, sites and pages.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Cf. Roberto Simanowski, *Interfictions. Vom Schreiben im Netz*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002, p. 165.

⁴² Mark Napier, "Shredder". At: <http://www.potatoland.org/shredder/>.

⁴³ Exonemo, "Discoder". At: <http://www.exonemo.com/DISCODER/indexE.html>.

⁴⁴ Mark Napier, "Riot". At: <http://potatoland.com/riot>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Apart from its critical agenda, this work is both chance-determined digital collage and ready-made, a hybrid between text and image as well as a user-based interactive dissection tool. Form, subject matter and means are collapsed together here. These alternative browsers all thematise the browser function, which filters and mediates information from the web, and structures and represents digital data in a certain standardised way. By dissecting the surface representations, the screen event, they draw attention back to the difference between code and surface, programming language and interface representation.⁴⁸ “Software is mindcontrol” is an underlying presumption of these web workers, and they aim to expose it as such by subverting normal browser functions. In these works, the user can literally interfere with the order of digital signs and code and dissect and manipulate the surface appearance of a chosen web-site. Dissection too becomes interactive here – it is no longer the poet, but the user who executes it.

Giselle Beiguelman’s “content = no cache” from 2001 aesthetically reworks error messages and system failure announcements.⁴⁹ Again, like one of her other works “Recycled”, also from 2001, this is a digital ready-made: existing chunks of code are equipped with new parameters and functions and presented in new screens and contexts.⁵⁰ Some of the works pull the code to the surface, questioning the relationship between screen presentation and source code, problematising the html publishing software slogan “what you see is what you get” by asking: is it really? Others play with the issue of controllability: what seems controllable becomes out of control, habitual responses are frustrated and get the user nowhere. They deliberately render inoperative what usually works and thwart normally efficient strategies such as scrolling and clicking.

One group in particular plays with the user’s worst fears of losing control and data: the duo JODI, consisting of Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans, artistically stages system and communication errors, by means of imitating computer crashes and by triggering processes on the screen which seem entirely out of the control of the user. They confront the user with seemingly unruly flickering symbols which can not be managed or contained. “Oss” from 1998 for instance triggers a chaotic dance of

⁴⁸ Cf. Christiane Heibach, *Literatur im elektronischen Raum*, p. 251.

⁴⁹ Giselle Beiguelman, “content = no cache”. At: <http://www.desvirtual.com/nocache/index.htm>.

⁵⁰ Giselle Beiguelman, “Recycled”. At: <http://www.desvirtual.com/recycled/index.htm>.

black browser windows, which take possession of the desktop surface and keep reproducing at a terrifying pace.⁵¹ In “asdfg” from 1999, the back-button as well as the close window command are temporarily disabled – the user seems hopelessly trapped on a page flashing a jumble of signs so violently that the browser window shakes.⁵² As Heibach points out, works like these are disturbing because they break with the illusion of being in charge, and shatter standardised responses to computer conventions, thus revealing the essentially arbitrary nature of convention and representation – just as the poets of the historical and neo-avant-garde did with language.⁵³

The most challenging contemporary digital works investigate the peculiarities of the screen presentation and their translation into different numeric systems and the role of the code in the production of meaning. Beiguelman rightly asks: “The Internet is no more than a big text. But what happens when this text emerges, when it occupies the surface of the screen?”⁵⁴ The screen event is an optical illusion, what is shown is not there, but is the browser interpretation of a textual policy. Some digital works serve as constant reminders about surface and illusion, as well as the code and convention based nature of the medium by revealing code and artifice and breaking with representational standards established by software and Internet protocols. In this sense above all they seem very similar to the avant-garde experiments: the poets of the historical and the neo-avant-garde too cut their respective medium open, to uncover and reveal the hidden structures of language as well as the conventions and rules governing its usage.

⁵¹ Jodi, “OSS”. At: <http://oss.jodi.org/i/index.html>.

⁵² Jodi, “asdfg”. At: <http://www.asdfg.jodi.org>.

⁵³ Cf. Christiane Heibach, *Literatur im elektronischen Raum*, p. 255.

⁵⁴ Giselle Beiguelman, “the book after the book”. At: <http://www.desvirtual.com/thebook/english/zone.htm>.

CONCLUSION

As the preceding chapters have shown, the cultural context from which language dissection springs, the soil in which it flowers, is characterised above all by social and historical change, the collapse and crisis of systems of belief and of established value structures as well as technological transformations which impact profoundly upon the sphere of everyday-life. However, the reactions to these moments of transition differ drastically from movement to movement and from poet to poet. In some cases, the transformations of the empirically observable world are glorified and perceived as unambiguously positive, as in the case of the Italian Futurists, who unreservedly worship and pay homage to war, technology, machines and a faster pace of life. To a certain degree, Gomringer and Bense embrace and celebrate technological changes as well: Gomringer conceives of his constellations as responses to more precise, condensed and swifter communicative structures, which are caused by changes in the dominant communication media, an increase in advertisements and the advent of abbreviated technical languages based on command and response patterns. Bense is perhaps the most technophile poet in the concrete orbit, firmly believing that the spheres of technology, science and art should be merged together and mutually enrich each other. He advocates the use of rational, objective and information theoretical premises for the description of literature. Consequentially, Bense is also the first to paradigmatically alter the status of technology in the work of art: in the first experiments with digital literature, technology is transformed from being mere incentive, stimulus and model for poetic inventions to becoming the actual agent of execution, the means and instrument of effectuation.¹

Other poets, however, perceive recent cultural and historical developments as profoundly disturbing and unsettling: Ball and Hausmann in particular despair about the defeat of moral and humanist values and an all-embracing cultural corruption in the wake of World War I. Similarly, Mon considers both culture and language to be in a state of acute and profound crisis after the experience of the Holocaust and the

¹ To a certain degree, one could also name the typewriter here – it too was a mechanical device which allowed for the translation of ideas into practice.

Third Reich. The *Wiener Gruppe* too tries to come to terms with the aftermath of recent historical events, and protests against the consensus orientated cultural status quo in a post-war Austria which refuses to take responsibility for its enthusiasm for the *Anschluß*.

Conversely, the *Noigandres* group thrives in a time of new departures, a climate of political optimism marked by the dawning of a new political era, economic progress and cultural confidence. They draw upon a lively art and architecture scene, which takes up vital inspiration from the Bauhaus and prospers under the influence of concrete art. As has become evident in the previous chapters, developments in the fine arts have proven to be an imperative factor triggering and stimulating language dissection in both historical avant-garde and concrete poetry: the Cubists' abandonment of the central perspective and their fragmentation of the picture space are not only vital incentives and aesthetic models for Apollinaire's poetic endeavours, but Braque's, Picasso's and Gris' influence reaches much further and permeates into the poetic frameworks of most other avant-garde painters and poets as well. Likewise, futurist, suprematist and abstract art leave their imprints on the quests of Marinetti, Khlebnikov and Ball respectively. Concrete art is not only the most important aesthetic model and reference point for Gomringer, but is also of crucial significance for the *Noigandres* group, visible not only in their poetic and theoretic practice but also in their interdisciplinary collaborations with the *Grupo Ruptura* painters.

Concrete art, moreover, is a vital link between the two stages of avant-garde production, since it is the product of an increasingly constructivist spirit which pervaded many diverse European avant-garde movements in the early 1920s, and found its way into the poetics of Hausmann and Schwitters most notably. Via Kurt Schwitters and Theo van Doesburg, the narrative until Hausmann is tied together with the narrative starting with Gomringer.

It has become obvious, contrary to many claims still in circulation, that the concrete poets are far from just reprising and re-staging what their predecessors have done before them. Though they openly recuperate and build upon lines of questioning which originated in the historical avant-garde, they enhance them, develop them further and adapt them to their own sensibilities and distinctive background

situations, drawing upon new theories and concepts. Furthermore, in the context of concrete poetry, Bürger's other allegations against the neo-avant-garde, namely the accusation that it institutionalised the avant-garde and reinstated the idea of aesthetic autonomy, do not seem to hold up to scrutiny. The concrete poetry movement was far from operating from the inside of the institution of art in its beginnings – just like the historical avant-garde movements, the poets established an independent network of publication and dissemination, and were admitted entry into official publication channels only years after the initial emergence of the movement. Moreover, the intention of raising consciousness and making the recipients rethink and question their own preconceptions and positions was still high up on the agenda of objectives of the concrete poets, just as it was in the historical avant-garde, which refutes the charge that concrete poetry is affirmative and post-utopian.

The common themes, strategies and techniques which have crystallised in the preceding study as dominant links between the two stages of avant-garde poetry are above all manifest in a dedication to language dissection on different levels of linguistic organisation and in the exploration of the material dimension of language across visual, acoustic and semantic parameters. Furthermore, the importance of, and explicit responses to, quests in the fine arts and developments in the realms of technology, a concern with the deliberate transgression of genre boundaries, the conceptual expectation of a recipient who actively partakes in the production of meaning, as well as an emphasis on the creative exploration of space count among mutual points of interest.

One of the most pronounced differences between the two phases becomes apparent in the manifestos and self-reflexive theoretical texts that accompany the works of the concrete poets, in which more advanced and precise linguistic concepts and a new scientifically enhanced vocabulary allow for much more accurate descriptions and outlines of intentions, poetological and philosophical objectives, conceptions of reader-responses as well as explanations of the experimental processes involved.² To

² Glyn Purselove argues that "the course of poetry has paralleled the course of contemporary linguistics". Glyn Purselove, "Some contexts for Sound Poetry". In: *Stereo Headphones. An occasional magazine of the new poetries*, vol. 1, 1971, no. 4.

a certain degree, some concrete productions seem to be guided more rigorously by theoretical reflections, method and systematic and objective analytical considerations, particularly in the cases of Bense, Mon and also Achleitner. As a result of the expansion of the conceptual range for the description of language matters, the linguistic issues under scrutiny in concrete poetry are often more finely delineated, minuscule and defined. The enhancement of the theoretical tools is reflected in the poetic works, which tend to be more objectively constructed and systematically executed. On a visual level, concrete poetry frequently appears more constructivist and geometrical in nature.

Furthermore, since the concrete poets build upon an existing body of work, the issue of an explicit and critical analysis of, and response to, their literary ancestry gains momentum. The poets of the *Noigandres* group most pronouncedly consider their agenda as the reworking and continuation of a carefully selected tradition of literary invention. Its poets regard concrete poetry as the product of a critical evolution of form, as the result and synthesis of a thorough analysis of a genealogy of poetic inventions, and they seek to keep alive and develop further this tradition as well as to instil it into the consciousness of the recipients and thereby into Brazilian culture as a whole.

The case of the Brazilians in particular raises the question whether our understanding of the historical avant-garde is not decidedly shaped and moulded by the neo-avant-garde. Without the critical assessment and the poetic reworking of the tradition by the concrete poets, along with their more sophisticated and precise analytic terminology, could we really understand and grasp the significance of the historical avant-garde poets? The concrete poets have not only developed further the quest of the avant-garde poets, but they also elucidated it.

While the specific motivations for language dissection in avant-garde and concrete poetry differ from poet to poet and from group to group, there is also a set of basic objectives and shared notions about language and communication, which constitute common denominators. In some poetical frameworks, certain issues and factors play a more pronounced role as driving forces for the attack upon the given order of signs, while they are of less importance in others. There is an array of different concerns,

aspects and premises at stake which carry different weight in different aesthetic conceptions: some poets apply their criticism predominantly to the referential aptitude of language, others are mainly concerned with its cognitive and epistemological function, while yet others are preoccupied above all with the social, cultural and historical implications that are inseparable from the linguistic order.

Marinetti's example illustrates a concern mainly with the representational capacity of language: he regards language as not expressive enough, he considers it as unable to adequately convey a drastically altered sensibility and to keep up with a faster pace of life. His typographical experiments and syntactical dissections mainly serve the purpose of enhancing and strengthening language's expressive force. Marinetti attacks the obligation of arranging thought into sequential, and, in his view, circumstantial and time-consuming sequences determined by the rules of grammar, which impede the kind of swift and effective communication required by the times. In contrast to most other avant-garde poets, he does not aim at abolishing, blurring or destabilising the referential dimension, but at fortifying it: Marinetti deploys formally innovative strategies mostly for the communication of tangible subject matter.

To a certain degree, Khlebnikov applies his criticism to the representational aptitude of language as well, but on the level of words: he considers language in its current state as not precise enough, as deficient and as lacking essential concepts. However, in contrast to Marinetti, there is a deeply utopian agenda behind his morphological dissections and re-combinations. Khlebnikov believes that exact communication is the key to a better world. Human misunderstanding is the result of inexact interpersonal exchanges, which are the corollary of an insufficient conceptual range and too many restrictions imposed upon word creation, which would naturally replenish the linguistic register and thus ultimately help to contribute to a more peaceful world order.

Other poets, particularly Wiener and Mon, decompose language because they consider it as restrictive, as shaping and ultimately impeding thought. They attack the cognitive and epistemological side of language: language is considered a tyrannical force which imposes upon experience, which shapes a view of reality and determines

what is thinkable and what is not and thus limits the free movement of thought.³ Mon considers language as structuring, generating and ultimately as controlling reality. Wiener perceives language as a cultural corset, as epistemological straitjacket which prevents the agility and unimpeded development of the intellectual faculties. A limited array of concepts and possibilities for combination, determined by what is legitimate within given syntactical frameworks, restricts the number of possible thoughts, Wiener believes. By breaking up existing language structures, both Mon and Wiener want to open up ways of thinking outside culturally legitimated norms and attempt to create possibilities for thoughts beyond given parameters and structures.

Ball and Mon most pronouncedly perceive language as stained, as damaged and corrupted and as burdened with historical ballast. Their dissections, in tune with Barthe's notion of the innocence of monadic letters, are essentially an attempt to seek refuge in the last unspoiled resort of language: its material realm, the only linguistic territory which is not tainted and permeated by ideology or weighed down by a history of abuse. The blemished, troubled medium has become utterly inappropriate for the transmission of any messages, even those that criticise the status quo, it can no longer be deployed in an uncritical manner, but has to be dismantled itself, they feel.

Furthermore, for both Ball and Hausmann and to a certain degree also for Wiener, language dissection is an expression of deep-seated and profound cultural criticism: their disenchantment with their age is so utter and acute that absolutely nothing of culture and its manifestations, not even language, can be accepted as given anymore. Corruption has permeated all orders – social, pictorial and linguistic ones – and consequently, they feel, everything is suspicious: all systems have to be dismantled and taken apart as a consequence. Dissected language is stripped of its use-value, it is de-functionalised and de-pragmatised and can no longer be put to work in the cultural machinery.

³ This view is to some degree concurrent with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or the idea of linguistic relativity. Cf. A.P. Martinich, "Introduction". In: *The Philosophy of Language*. Edited by A.P. Martinich. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 23-24.

In addition, there is a symbolic dimension to Hausmann's and Ball's dissections: they are acts of textual disobedience, symbolic expressions of protest. They withdraw the most basic manifestation of social consensus: the adherence to a given set of linguistic laws. The shattering of discourse in the Dadaists' poems is a *Modellversuch*: for them, language symbolises cultural orders, rituals and conventions in general. In a synecdochic manner, language is both constituent part of the body of cultural consensus and a symbol for it at the same time.⁴ Revolution of poetic language is a model for revolution elsewhere. As a consequence, the signifying process and linguistic structures themselves become the centre of attention, for they are both amongst the most stable supporting pillars of the existing order and are burned in effigy, in place of and as symbols for the real thing.

The critical dimension both of historical avant-garde and concrete poetry becomes apparent above all when one considers the individual textual examples as exemplary demonstrations, as paradigmatic models, as symptomatic manifestations of an underlying authorial conviction, namely the belief that existing orders on all levels have become problematic and need to be scrutinised. Nicolaus Einhorn points out:

Die kritische Reflexion auf das Verhältnis von Sprache und Realität, beziehungsweise von Sprachgebrauch und Realität wird erst dann ein von den experimentellen Texten abhebbares Prinzip, wenn der einzelne Text als exemplarische Demonstration eines analytischen Eingriffs in das System der Kommunikationssprache vorgestellt wird.⁵

This exemplary dimension is also where Einhorn locates the emancipatory function of concrete poetry: he argues that the recipient is expected to understand, abstract and apply the principles suggested in concrete poetry, which would then lead him or her to scrutinise the language he or she is confronted with on a daily basis. Einhorn writes:

⁴ The concrete poet Chris Bezzel writes: "[...] ein revolutionärer schriftsteller [ist] nicht der [...], der semantisch-poetische sätze erfindet, die die nötige revolution zum inhalt und ziel haben, sondern jemand, der mit poetischen mitteln dichtung als modell der revolution selbst revolutioniert. [...] revolutionär ist damit eine dichtung, die das medium sprache selbst verändert, umfunktioniert, die den hierarchischen sprachlichen charakter zerstört, die im neuartigen sprachspiel und durch das neuartige sprachspiel diejenige gesellschaftliche umwälzung vorwegnimmt, für die alle revolutionäre arbeiten. dichter unter diesem aspekt ist also der, der mit poetischen mitteln im medium der sprache die sprache selbst als ein menschliches Zeichensystem für menschen revolutioniert. dichtung der revolution bedeutet revolution der dichtung." Chris Bezzel, "dichtung und revolution", pp. 35-36.

⁵ Nicolaus Einhorn, "Zeigen was gezeigt wird". In: *TEXT + KRITIK. Zeitschrift für Literatur. KONKRETE POESIE*, vol. 25, 1970, p. 4.

Indem der Leser die Sprache zum Gegenstand seiner Aufmerksamkeit macht, wird er die durch die Sprache und durch den Sprachgebrauch bewirkte Manipulation durchschauen und sich ihr, wenigstens zum Teil, widersetzen und entziehen können. Insofern kann die experimentelle Literatur emanzipatorischen Effekt haben.⁶

The dismembering of language in Gomringer's, Mon's and Bense's frameworks is also a corollary of their notion of language as a concrete object: they believe it can be treated like any other physically existent material, they consider it as tangible matter with intrinsic and autonomous aesthetic qualities and subject it to permutative and aleatoric procedures in an attempt to introduce an objective and experimental dimension into the poetic realm.

In spite of these sometimes diverging, sometimes shared agendas, all language dissectors are united by one fundamental motive: all of them aim to create awareness, to sensitise the recipient to the material dimension of language and to minuscule configurations on different levels of linguistic organisation. All of them uncover the convention-based and essentially arbitrary nature of language and the codes and rituals which govern its usage. By defamiliarising the familiar, they try to make the recipients see linguistic, communicative and social conventions and processes anew. Bürger too acknowledges that the avant-garde produced a new and different type of socially and politically committed literature, a type of literature where commitment is not necessarily palpable on the content level, but manifest in the structural principles of organisation, in the form itself. Bürger partly agrees with Adorno's dictum that the non-organically structured artwork is already emancipatory in itself, because it blatantly refuses reconciliation and bursts open prevailing ideologies.⁷

By means of presenting and suggesting examples of possible worlds beyond the parameters of existing orders, the avant-garde poets demonstrate the arbitrariness of the given orders and the fact that these constitute just one possible scheme of organisation out of many. As Michel Foucault puts it in *Les mots et les choses*, in the array of linguistic disorder of the avant-garde poets, "ce serait le désordre qui fait scintiller les fragments d'un grand nombre d'ordres possibles dans la dimension, sans

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, p. 127.

loi ni géométrie, de l'*hétéroclite* [...].”⁸ The avant-garde poets point to ways of thinking outside the tangible by distorting the familiar landmarks of thought, by means of, as Foucault writes:

ébranlant toutes les surfaces ordonnées et tous les plans qui assagissent pour nous le foisonnement des êtres, faisant vaciller et inquiétant pour longtemps notre pratique millénaire du Même et de l’Autre.⁹

The dissections of the avant-garde poets are profoundly disturbing because they undermine and put into play the most basic concord about not only linguistic, but in fact all orders: they produce a landslide by destroying not only the syntax with which we construct sentences, but also another syntax, “celle moins manifeste qui fait ‘tenir ensemble’ (à côté et en face les uns des autres) les mots et les choses”.¹⁰ Foucault writes:

Les *hétérotopies* inquiètent, sans doute parce qu’elles minent secrètement le langage, parce qu’elles empêchent de nommer ceci et cela, parce qu’elles brisent les noms communs ou les enchevêtrent, parce qu’elles ruinent d’avance la ‘syntaxe’ [...]. [...] les *hétérotopies* [...] dessèchent le propos, arrêtent les mots sur eux-mêmes, contestent, dès sa racine, toute possibilité de grammaire; elles dénouent les mythes et frappent de stérilité le lyrisme des phrases.¹¹

The subtle suggestion of other possible orders implied in the process of shattering linguistic structures serves above all the purpose of stimulating reflection and, as a result of this, of triggering a change of patterns of thoughts and behaviour or attitudes in the recipients, who are expected to question their preconceptions and to recognise the systems that surround them as products of social conventions and agreement. Bürger’s concept of the aesthetics of shock, which he considers the main device of the historical avant-garde movements, is supported by a similar idea. The experience of shock, triggered by a withdrawal of sense, should serve as stimulus for a change of the recipient’s praxis of life, Bürger writes.¹² This moment – the stimulation of

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: Édition Gallimard, 1966, p. 9.

⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

¹² Cf. Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, p. 108.

psychological and intellectual changes in the recipient, who is expected to set out to impact upon and transform social relations as a result of this process – is what Kristeva calls the social function of the disturbance of the established forms of linguistic exchange.

The notion of the inherent politics of form, its potentially transformative powers, and the identification of avant-garde literature as a site of resistance to dominant ideology is one which Kristeva, Adorno and most of the avant-garde poets have in common. The disruption of the familiar organisation of language is to steer the recipient into a frame of mind where other social norms are no longer uncritically accepted either, where they too begin to appear just as arbitrary and convention-based as linguistic rules and conventions. Most acts of language dissection in avant-garde poetry are ultimately motivated by the desire to draw attention to and challenge the linguistic, cognitive, and ideological presumptions, beliefs and limitations of the recipients, and, by implication, of society.

APPENDIX

1. Guillaume Apollinaire, "Lundi Rue Christine", 1913

La mère de la concierge et la concierge laisseront tout passer
Si tu es un homme tu m'accompagneras ce soir
Il suffirait qu'un type maintint la porte cochère
Pendant que l'autre monterait

Trois becs de gaz allumés
La patronne est poitrinaire
Quand tu auras fini nous jouerons une partie de jacquet
Un chef d'orchestre qui a mal à la gorge
Quand tu viendras à Tunis je te ferai fumer du kief

Ça a l'air de rimer

Des piles de soucoupes des fleurs un calendrier
Pim pam pim
Je dois fiche près de 300 francs à ma probloque
Je préférerais me couper le parfaitement que de les lui donner

Je partirai à 20 h. 27
Six glaces s'y dévisagent toujours
Je crois que nous allons nous embrouiller encore davantage
Cher monsieur
Vous êtes un mec à la mie de pain
Cette dame a le nez comme un ver solitaire
Louise a oublié sa fourrure
Moi je n'ai pas de fourrure et je n'ai pas froid
Le Danois fume sa cigarette en consultant l'horaire
Le chat noir traverse la brasserie

Ces crêpes étaient exquises
La fontaine coule
Robe noire comme ses ongles
C'est complètement impossible
Voici monsieur
La bague en malachite
Le sol est semé de sciure
Alors c'est vrai
La serveuse rousse a été enlevée par un libraire

Un journaliste que je connais d'ailleurs très vaguement

Écoute Jaques c'est très sérieux ce que je vais te dire

Compagnie de navigation mixte

Il me dit monsieur voulez-vous voir ce que je peux faire d'eaux-fortes et de tableaux

Je n'ai qu'une petite bonne

Après déjeuner café du Luxembourg
Une fois là il me présente un gros bonhomme
Qui me dit
Écoutez c'est charmant
A Smyrne à Naples en Tunisie
Mais nom de Dieu où est-ce
La dernière fois que j'ai été en Chine
C'est il y a huit ou neuf ans
L'Honneur tient souvent à l'heure que marque la pendule
La quinte major

Source: Guillaume Apollinaire, *Calligrammes. Poems of peace and war (1913 – 1916). A Bilingual Edition*. Los Angeles; London: University of California Press Berkeley, 2004, pp. 52-57.

2. F. T. Marinetti, "Bombardment", 1914

Bombardment

every 5 seconds sieging cannons split
space with a **tam-tuumb** tune
mutiny of 500 echoes to tusk it
mince it scatter it to infinity

in the centre of those crushed **tam-tuumbs**
(50 kilometers square)
leap explosions cuts fists blows batteries rapid
volleys Violence ferociousness regularity this
low heavy scanning of the strange mad most
agitated piercing notes of the battle Fury breathlessness
ears eyes
nostrils open-attentive
strength what joy to see hear smell everything
everything **taratatata** of machine guns shriek
breathlessly under bites **slappps traak-**
traak whip lashes **pic-pac-pum-tumb** oddities
jumps height 200 m. of fusillade
Down down to the bottom of the orchestra ponds
to plash oxen buffalo
cattle prods carts **pluff plaff** rear-
ing of horses **flic flac zing zing shiaaak**
hilarious neighing **eeeeeee...** shuffling of feet clinking 3
Bulgarian battalions marching **croooc-craac**
(*SLOW TWO TEMPI*) Shumi Maritza
or Karvavena **croooc craaac** shouting of
officers slamming like brass plates
pan here **paack** there **ching buuum**

ching chiak (PRESTO) chiachiachiachiachiaak
 up down here there around up high watch out
 above the head **chiaak** beautiful **Flames**

flames

flames

flames

flames

flames

flames

destruction of the forts be-

flames

flames

hind that smoke Shukri Pasha communicates by te-
 lephone with 27 forts in Turkish in Ger-
 man **Hallo Ibrahim Rudolf Hallô Hallô**

actors roles echoes prompters

scenarios of smoke forests

applauses smell of hay mud dung I don't

feel any longer my frozen feet smell of salt-

peter smell of rot Earrdrums

flutes clarinettes everywhere low high birds

chirp beatitude shadows *chip-chip-chip-* breeze

green herds *don-dan-don-dan-bèèè* **tam-tumb-**

tumb tumb-tumb-tumb-tumb

tumb Orchestra madmen to cud-

gel orchestra professors these most

cudgelled plaaaaay plaaaaay Grrrrreat

rattles do not erase determine re-cuttttting them

lesser noises Minnnnnnnute fragments

of echoes in the theatre width 300 squa-

re kilometers

Rivers Maritza

Tungia stretched out

Mountains Ro-

dopi straight

mounds scaffolds gal-

lery 2000 schrapnels to throwing up of arms explosions of

whitest kerchiefs full of gold **Tum-**

tumb

2000 grenades

hurled to tear out with craches hair

shadows **zang-tumb-zang-tuum**

tuuumb orchestra of the noises of war

swelling under a note of silence

held in the high sky spheric-

al balloon gilded watching shooting

aerostatic park Kadi-Keuy

Source: Zbigniew Folejewski, *Futurism and its Place in the Development of Modern Poetry. A Comparative Study and Anthology*. Ottawa, Canada: University of Ottawa Press, 1980, pp. 182-187.

3. Max Bense, "wenn es aber doch nicht ist", 1967

es
ist
wenn
aber
doch
nicht

es ist
es doch
es aber
wenn es
wenn ist
es nicht
aber ist
doch ist
wenn doch
wenn aber
nicht ist
aber doch
doch nicht
wenn nicht
aber nicht

wenn es ist
es aber ist
ist es doch
wenn es aber
wenn es doch
es aber doch
es nicht ist
es doch nicht
wenn doch ist
wenn aber ist
aber doch ist
es aber nicht
wenn es nicht
doch nicht ist
wenn aber doch
wenn nicht ist
ist aber nicht
wenn doch nicht
wenn aber nicht
aber doch nicht

wenn es aber ist
es aber doch ist
wenn es doch ist
wenn es aber doch
es doch nicht ist
wenn es nicht ist

es aber nicht ist
wenn es aber nicht
wenn aber doch ist
es aber doch nicht
wenn es doch nicht
wenn doch nicht ist
aber doch nicht ist
wenn aber nicht ist
wenn aber doch nicht

wenn es aber doch ist
wenn es aber nicht ist
wenn es doch nicht ist
es aber doch nicht ist
wenn es aber doch nicht
wenn aber doch nicht ist

wenn es aber doch nicht ist

Source: Max Bense, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 4. Edited by Elisabeth Walther. Stuttgart; Weimar: Metzler, 1998, pp. 235-236.

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